

THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY ROUTES

Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

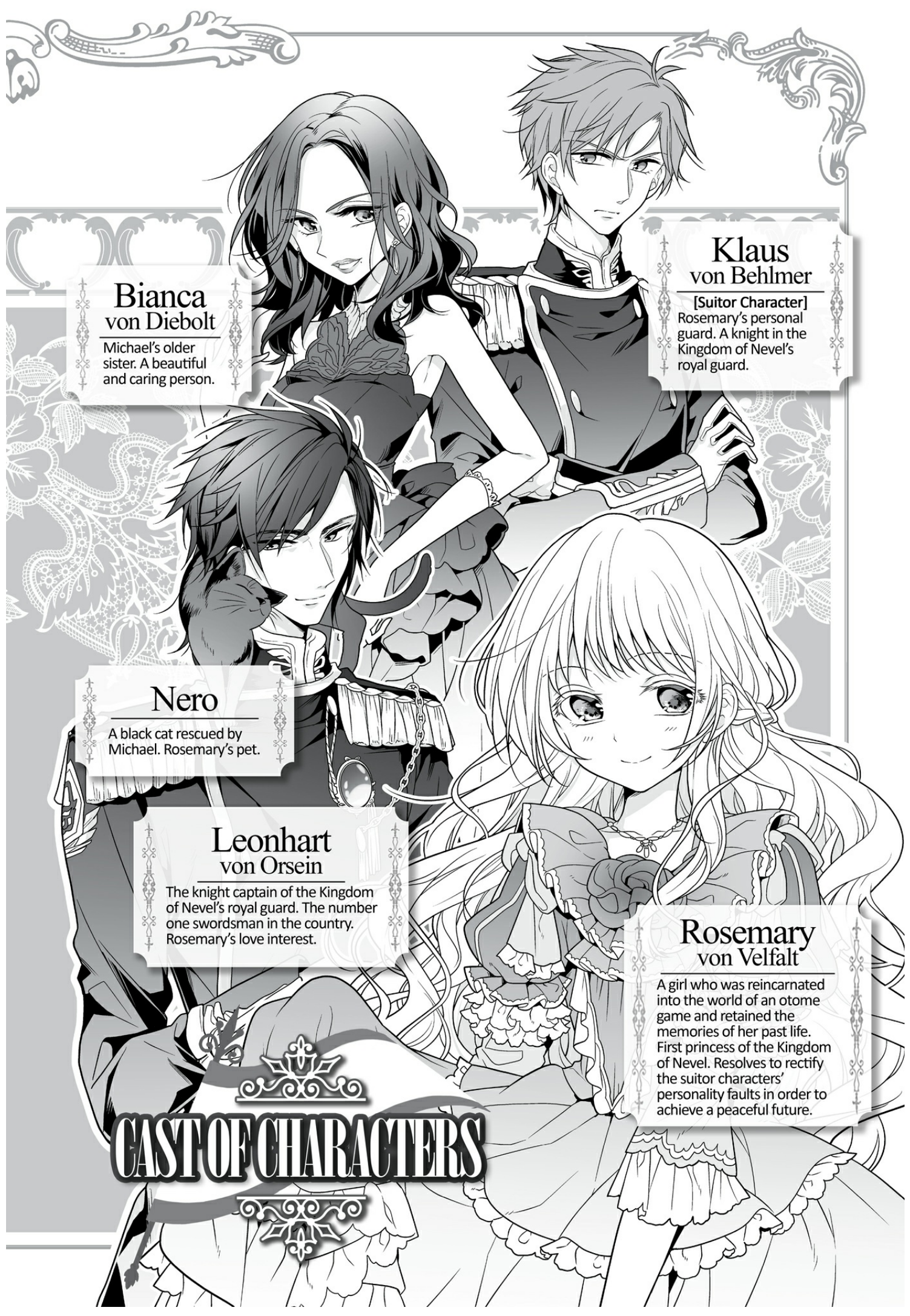
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Bianca von Diebolt

Michael's older
sister. A beautiful
and caring person.

Klaus von Behlmer

[Suitor Character]
Rosemary's personal
guard. A knight in the
Kingdom of Nevel's
royal guard.

Nero

A black cat rescued by
Michael. Rosemary's pet.

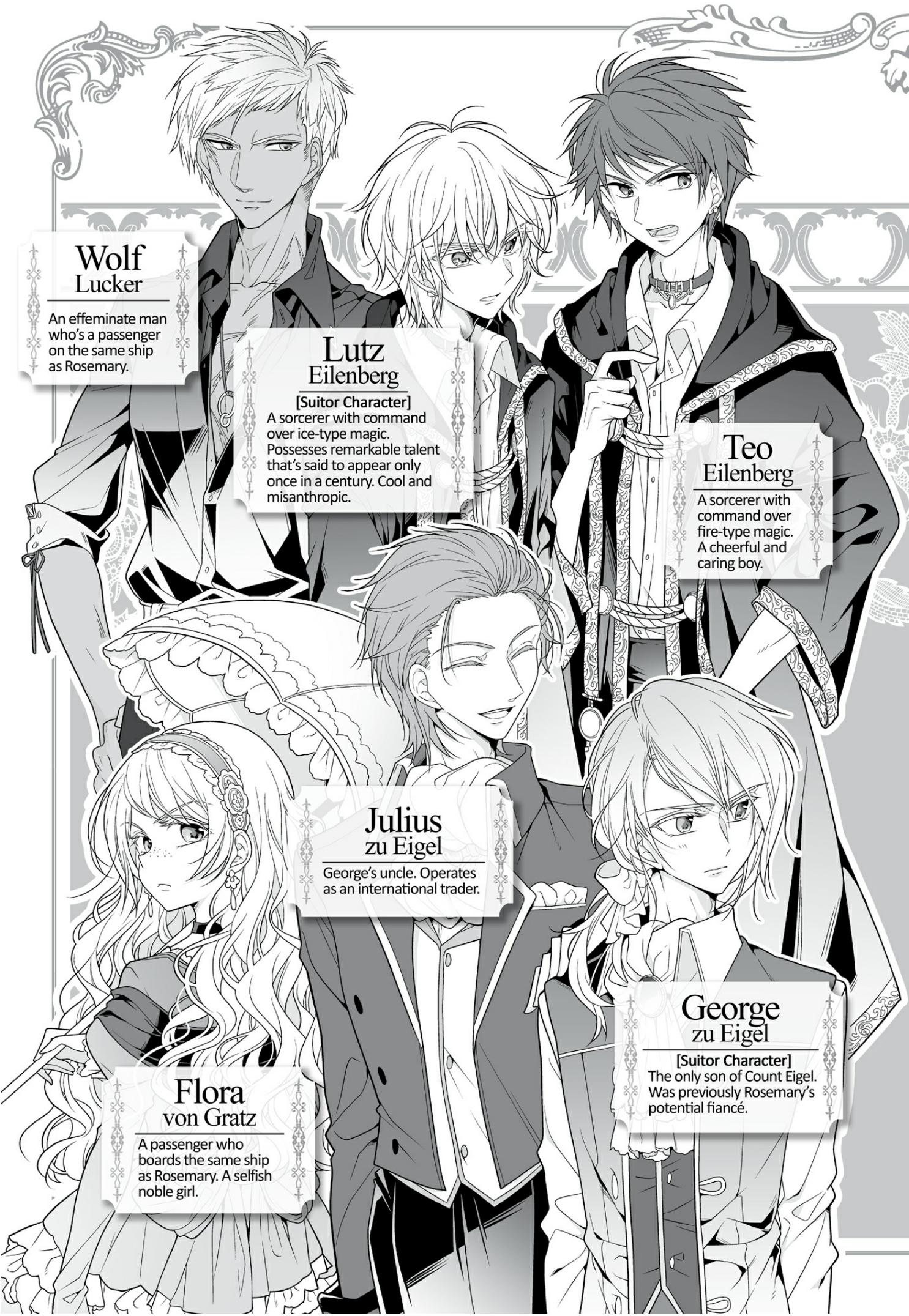
Leonhart von Orsein

The knight captain of the Kingdom
of Nevel's royal guard. The number
one swordsman in the country.
Rosemary's love interest.

Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who was reincarnated
into the world of an otome
game and retained the
memories of her past life.
First princess of the Kingdom
of Nevel. Resolves to rectify
the suitor characters'
personality faults in order to
achieve a peaceful future.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



Wolf Lucker

An effeminate man who's a passenger on the same ship as Rosemary.

Lutz Eilenberg

[Suitor Character]

A sorcerer with command over ice-type magic. Possesses remarkable talent that's said to appear only once in a century. Cool and misanthropic.

Teo Eilenberg

A sorcerer with command over fire-type magic. A cheerful and caring boy.

Julius zu Eigel

George's uncle. Operates as an international trader.

Flora von Gratz

A passenger who boards the same ship as Rosemary. A selfish noble girl.

George zu Eigel

[Suitor Character]

The only son of Count Eigel. Was previously Rosemary's potential fiancé.

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Prologue

There were three calamities that had befallen the Kingdom of Nevel in the game *Welcome to the Hidden World*: war, the demon lord's revival, and a plague.

My current objective was to prevent the last of those.

In the game, the plague spread from the south and then throughout Nevel in the blink of an eye. Nobody knew where it'd come from or how to treat it. Many of Nevel's subjects, already fatigued from the war, succumbed to the illness, and a significant number of deaths ensued.

Unlike in the game, the present version of Nevel had managed to avoid a war with Skelluts. The threat of conflict with Lapter still loomed large, but a fragile equilibrium had been maintained. Nevel's current future was clearly divergent from the game's, and perhaps there would be no pandemic. However, it'd be too dangerous to use that optimistic appraisal in my decision-making.

I'd begun to search for a medicine, knowing that a countermeasure for the disease was necessary, but the task had proved surprisingly difficult. What was worse, another problem had surfaced—apparently, Lapter had begun talks with Nevel's ally, Vint.

Lapter was located to Nevel's northeast, and Vint to Nevel's west. If those two nations joined forces, then Nevel would face a crisis. That situation just couldn't be allowed to transpire. Therefore, a plan had been devised; to prevent that potentially hostile alliance, and to strengthen our ties with Vint, I was to be married off to their crown prince.

My reward for doing my best in this world and for breaking dangerous flags was a one-way ticket to another country. What a joke.

When I refused, my father had named the conditions for avoiding the marriage: "demonstrate your value" and "accomplish something." Those were impossible tasks for a princess with barely any authority, but I hadn't the

slightest intention of throwing the towel in.

Political marriages might be the duty of princesses, but I wasn't having it.

Throughout everything, I'd worked to achieve my goal of marrying the royal guard captain, whom I adored. I'd come too far to even consider giving up on that.

I'll stop the pandemic and, no matter what, remove myself from the foreign engagement route!

An Unpleasant Encounter for the Reincarnated Princess

I'd finished my discussion with my father and had somehow managed to get him to agree to my request. Fatigue gripped my entire body, even though I'd done nothing physical.

My bed awaits me.

After concluding a simple farewell, I exited my father's room and stepped into the corridor. Just as my nerves had calmed down enough to let me exhale, I froze on the spot.

Immediately after entering the hallway, I spotted my guard Klaus and the two soldiers who guarded the king's bedroom. It should've been just those three, and yet, there was another figure that took me by surprise.

She took a step forward on the marble floor, which was inlaid with geometrical figures. Her high heels clacked, and the sound echoed loudly. I shivered. My instincts screamed at me to retreat, but behind me was a thick mahogany door. I had no escape route.

"Rosemary." She called my name. Her voice was monotonous, as though she were forcefully restraining powerful emotions.

I steeled my heart and forced myself to look up at her.

Confronting me was a young woman with her ladies-in-waiting in tow. Her red lips looked gorgeous against her snow-white skin. She had a pretty nose and slightly rosy cheeks. Her arched eyebrows radiated a formidable impression, and beneath them sat eyes like blue jewels.

Her gaze was pointed directly at me.

The fabric of her dress was a high-quality, deep-green velvet. Images of flowers were embroidered at the top of the bodice in a combination of gold and silver thread, and her sleeves featured a decoration of lace that was modest

enough not to be gaudy. The elegant dress and the way that she wore her hair up took the edge off her ostentatious beauty, projecting a settled impression that was more appropriate for her age.

This isn't the best time to be running into her... I grumbled a bit in my mind before plastering on a smile.

"Good day, mother."

The moment that I spoke, my mother's brows furrowed deeply.

Oh God, get me outta here.

Her contemptuous glare made me want to dash away like a lightning bolt, but I withstood that urge.

She almost opened her mouth to vent her emotions, but stopped herself. Perhaps she realized that this wasn't the place to lose her temper, so instead she commanded, "Come to my room."

First my father's room, now my mother's... Who came up with this torture method?

This time I genuinely wanted to turn tail and get the hell away from her. But I couldn't do that, of course, so I obediently followed in her trail.

I was led to the execution chamber—sorry, mother's room—which was ornamented with fabulous furniture and graceful trimmings which suited her style. The inner walls were decorated with elegant stucco details, and spectacular frescoes were painted on the ceiling. A large chandelier, covered in gold leaf and set with jewels, dangled from the ceiling, almost blinding me with the reflected glare of the candles.

Patterns in gold and silver were woven into the red cloth of the blackwood, cabriole-legged sofas. My mother took a seat opposite me at the table, which had cabriole legs that matched the couches. She narrowed her eyes as she stared at me from across the tabletop separating us.

That stomach-churning silence lasted for a while.

What's this supposed to be, a stress interview?

Her rouged lips slowly parted, only after a full thirty seconds had passed.

“What were you doing in His Majesty’s room?”

I imagined that I could hear her adding, *“when he hardly ever invites me?”*

Because of how frequently I’d been visiting the king’s chambers, I’d prepared myself for the possibility of mother catching on and lambasting me, but this was even scarier than I’d imagined.

She’s beautiful but has a sharp edge, which makes her so damn intimidating, I thought, trying to distract myself.

The king and queen didn’t share a bedroom. Nevel wasn’t a polygynous country, and neither of them had any concubines or lovers. So why did my mother and father have separate bedrooms? The answer was simple: it was my father’s stipulation.

I didn’t know why he’d decided that. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say that he was the sort of person who preferred to fall asleep alone. To be honest, I wasn’t particularly interested, so I hadn’t looked into it.

“He allowed me to have a very short conversation with him.” I’d picked my words to be inoffensive, but my mother’s glare grew no less fierce. *Yep, got it. The fact that I was in his room is enough evidence for you to deliver your verdict.*

“The king has much to do,” she said. “You mustn’t distract him with your whims.”

“Of course,” I agreed submissively. “I am very sorry.”

But my mother’s scowl remained.

“I know how very kind he is, but that doesn’t give you an excuse to bother him. You must stop taking advantage of his leniency toward children.”

I paused for a moment before answering, “Yes.” The delay in my response was inevitable, given the circumstances.

Are we talking about the same person? Mother, you need your eyes checked if he looks kind to you. Do you honestly see him as the sort of softhearted person who gives kids a pass?!

No, she must understand that he wouldn’t change his behavior depending on the age or sex of the person he’s interacting with. She just can’t bring herself to

acknowledge that I was the one he let in, and not her.

“If you need to speak to him, you should consult me first,” she said.
“Understood?”

I couldn’t say “yes.” I noticed my mother’s eyes growing fiercer while she watched me remain silent, but I wasn’t about to accept the unacceptable. I couldn’t see her granting me permission to see my father if I asked, so she was basically forbidding me any entry.

It had always been the same. My mother seemed to believe that Johan and I should do everything that she said. She’d convinced herself that children were meant to obey their parents, and she never even tried to hear our opinions.

Whatever reason I had for approaching my father wouldn’t matter to her.

“Rosemary?” Her tone was spiked with venom. She probably hadn’t liked my refusal to answer. Her eyes looked naturally intense at the best of times, but now, she’d made them look even more ferocious.

I predicted that the countdown to her full meltdown had started.

I knew that the best approach would’ve been to nod along and pretend to submit to her, but my tongue ignored that sly plan and moved on its own.
“Forgive me, but I cannot do that.”

“Wha—?!?!” my mother shrieked with wide-eyed astonishment. Perhaps she hadn’t expected direct opposition.

The thought struck me that we hadn’t seen much of each other at all recently. Her image of me was probably frozen as the five-year-old girl confined to her bedroom—an expressionless, unendearing, and obedient child.

A hollow smile almost rose to my lips. *So for that whole time, she’s never shown an interest in me. Come to think of it, she used to rant and rave about us having contact with Chris, but even that had fallen by the wayside at some point. She really does only have eyes for our father.*

While I admired her honest dedication, I wouldn’t ever want to copy it. The familial resemblance that I sensed in her single-hearted obsession made me pause for some brief reflection: *I think I should do my best to not turn out like*

her...

“Rosemary... Do you understand what you’re saying?”

I stared at her hands, which were trembling as if from pure rage, and then nodded. “I do, mother.” I had a mission, and the clock was ticking toward my deadline. I couldn’t afford to waste time by faltering here.

If she wants to stand in my way, then let her. I’ll figure out a way past her.

“Father has given me permission to visit his room. Even you can’t overturn that decision.”

“Y-You’re...”

“If I’m disturbing him, then he’ll inform me of that himself. Until then, I don’t plan to stop visiting him. I’m merely doing what I must.”

I knew that I was being combative, but I’d come too far to back down. I’d need to pay many more visits to my father’s room over the next two years, and I’d have nothing to show for my efforts if she interfered each and every time.

“Rosemary...” She called to me with a voice that sounded like it’d been thrown from the deepest pit in the world, but I’d said what I wanted, so I stood up and made my escape.

The Reincarnated Princess Suffers Consternation

It was the day after my mental fortitude had been whittled away by the lethal combo attack of a discussion with my father followed by a stress interview with my mother. I'd visited the library to look for a book on herbal medicines when suddenly, yet another bombshell struck me.

"Huh...?" I froze with my mouth still half-open.

The shock had been too great for me to react at once. My arms went limp and the books almost slid out from them, so I tightened my grip and glanced back up.

The beautiful lady that stood in front of my eyes smiled awkwardly and met my gaze. I thought that she must have been joking, but the look in her eyes told me otherwise. She'd never been the type to make jokes in such bad taste either.

"Is that...true?" I asked.

"It is," she confirmed clearly. Her almond eyes, one of which was adorned with a monocle, reflected my floundering expression. "I'm informing you later than usual due to the peculiarity of the case, but it's true. As of today, Michael von Diebolt has become an apprentice sorcerer."

The words of the beautiful intellectual in front of me—the head sorceress, Miss Irene von Altman—delivered my second shock of the day.

"Michael...has..."

I had trouble finding my words, and Miss Irene watched me with a pitiful look. It was only natural that she'd misinterpreted my surprise; she thought that my astonishment was caused by the revelation that Michael was a magic user.

But that wasn't the case. Michael's magical powers were something that I'd anticipated. In fact, I'd suspected it for some time, so that discovery wasn't enough to surprise me.

No, what had truly shocked me was that Michael had decided to *reveal* his powers.

He'd lived his whole life keeping his magic a secret, which absolutely made sense, given how magic users fared in Nevel. Fear, scorn, and even persecution were commonplace. Michael had managed to live over ten years without letting anyone catch on. Surely, he would've preferred to keep his abilities hidden so he could spend his days in peace.

So why? Why did he choose this moment to open up about his magic?

I couldn't understand his motivation.

"Did Michael offer this confession himself?" I asked.

"He did," Miss Irene confirmed. "It was very courageous of him."

I then asked Miss Irene the question that was plaguing my mind. "Why...now? He's never told anyone, so why?"

In response, she smiled softly. "This is just my opinion, but I think that you're probably the one who influenced his decision."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes. His magic is..."

My jaw dropped at what Miss Irene said next.

After parting with Miss Irene in the library, I hurried to the greenhouse. Evening had already fallen, and the greenhouse was deathly silent when I entered. It was well past the time for watering the plants, so neither Lutz nor Teo was present. However, there was a thin figure near one of the walls.

He was standing listlessly and staring up at the domed glass ceiling. It seemed that he was observing the orange-to-blue gradient of the evening sky, and I couldn't spot any emotion lacing the side of his face that was visible to me. However, the sight of him seemed slightly gloomy, either because of the shadows cast by the waning sunlight shining in or because of my own guilty conscience.

“Michael.”

His shoulders flinched when I called his name, but that was the only moment when he seemed uneasy. He calmly turned to me.

My eyes grew round when we stood face-to-face. He seemed completely different, even though only a few days had passed since we’d last seen each other.

His long bangs, which had always hidden half of his face, had been combed back neatly over his head, revealing for the first time his shapely nose and monolid eyes. The dark bags beneath his eyes had largely subsided, making him appear much healthier. He looked taller as well, perhaps because his hunched posture had been rectified.

Michael’s body hadn’t quite rounded out enough for his height, and he was dressed in a robe that was decorated with the same design as the ones that Lutz and Teo wore. However, in contrast to the other mages, the color of his robe was white, and the inner shirt was a dark gray.

It might be easier to understand if I borrow phrasing from role-playing games: Lutz and Teo resembled black mages, whereas Michael looked like a white mage.

Michael stared at me, remaining quiet. I didn’t know what to say at first either, so there was only silence.

I was unable to think up the right words, so in the end, I simply decided to ask what I most wanted to know—actually, no, what I *had* to know.

“I’ve heard that you’ve become a sorcerer.”

“I have,” Michael affirmed gently. The calm tone of his voice only served to tear at my heart.

“Is it... Did I...”

Is it my fault? Did I drive you into a corner?

I’d tried to ask these questions, but my voice had faltered, obscuring the ends of my sentences. My hands were gripping onto my skirt, crumpling the fabric. After watching me sputter—frozen on the spot like a child on the verge of tears

—his dark, blue-tinged eyes shot me a kind look.

“No. I came here of my own free will. It had nothing to do with you.”

His denial provoked an angered response in me. “Nothing? Even though *you’re* the earth-affinity sorcerer I was looking for?”

Unintentionally, my questions had come out sounding aggressive. Even though he’d done nothing wrong, I’d gotten myself depressed and had taken out my frustrations on him. My words couldn’t have been more inconsiderate.

I felt pathetic and ashamed. I just wanted to disappear.

I’d more or less noticed that Michael had magical powers, but had never stopped to think about what affinity he could possess. If I had, it wouldn’t have been hard to figure it out; he didn’t have offensive powers like Lutz’s fire magic or Teo’s ice magic. He’d done a perfect job of keeping his abilities undiscovered.

But I’d been ignorant and insensitive. I’d spoken about earth-affinity sorcerers in his presence time and time again.

Wouldn’t an earth-affinity sorcerer be able to uncover the source components of the medicine? We’ll need the help of an earth-affinity sorcerer to concoct the medicine and save the lives of countless people.

I’d repeated those things over and over in front of Michael, agonizing him with pangs of conscience. And all the while, I’d been boasting about how I was merely doing the hard work that was necessary as a princess. While spouting off that he should follow whichever path he wanted, I’d unknowingly blocked his freedom of choice.

I’d eradicated his potential to choose the life of a priest in search of peace.

“Your Highness,” Michael said after a long silence.

“Michael?”

“I’ll say it again: this had nothing to do with you. Everything I’ve done up until now, and everything I will do hereafter—none of it involves you.” He said this matter-of-factly, no stutter, no blush.

With a calm look in his eyes that made him seem like someone else entirely, he quietly abandoned me.

A little more than a month had passed since Michael had become an apprentice sorcerer. I'd visited Julius's mansion, and there I was given a shocking announcement.

"You've discovered what the medicine is made from...?" I repeated what I'd been told.

George, sitting on the sofa opposite me, heard my amazed murmur and nodded. "Although we haven't yet pinned down where it grows." He then handed me a bundle of papers that had been placed on the table.

I took the documents from him and flicked through them. There was a drawing of a tall tree with an unbending trunk. It was naked of leaves and branches near the bottom, but higher up were thick growths of leaves and blooming flowers. Scrupulous notes detailing the particularities of the leaves and flowers crowded the space not taken up by the illustration.

The very information that I'd wanted was in my hands, complete. But the immediate feeling I felt toward that fact was confusion rather than joy.

Julius and George's investigation had been undertaken with great haste all along. And obviously, in the palace, I'd scoured through every book I could get my hands on that seemed likely to hold pertinent information. Even so, we'd had no luck finding any leads.

And yet...

"How did you get this so suddenly?"

How did progress come so abruptly? I expressed my doubt.

"Michael assisted us. We have him to thank."

Hearing George say that, a part of me thought, *I knew it*.

Because he possessed earth-affinity magical powers, Michael would have a wealth of knowledge about vegetation. I didn't know how he could discern features of a tree from a pill which had lost all of those details, but magic might've made that possible. Plus, Michael had a kind soul, so it wouldn't be strange for him to offer George his assistance. I was sure that Michael would

gladly volunteer if he knew that the venture would save countless lives.

But one question remained: why hadn't Michael told me?

George and Julius might've been the primary investigators, but Michael was aware that I was the one who had initiated the inquiry.

Michael is living at the palace now, so wouldn't it have saved time if he'd come to me, instead of traveling all the way to Julius's mansion to offer aid? If he'd just contacted me through Miss Irene, I would've set aside any amount of time for him.

I think he really is avoiding me.

The worry that I'd shoved away into the back of my mind began to sound like the truth.

I hadn't been able to see Michael even once after the day that he'd enrolled as an apprentice sorcerer. I'd thought that maybe I'd have the chance to meet him in the greenhouse since he was an earth-affinity magic user, but that expectation had been mistaken. Michael was never there.

According to Miss Irene, he was tending to plants in a different room. The explanation given was that Lutz, Teo, and I looked after the plants in the greenhouse, so our influence would interfere with Miss Irene's ability to measure the extent of Michael's powers.

I'd accepted that reason, but something had still gnawed at my mind. Michael kept his distance from the greenhouse, even on his days off and during his breaks. *Is it because I'm there?* I'd consider this possibility each day before telling myself that I was overthinking it.

"Your Highness." A call from behind me dragged my focus back down to reality and away from my anguished worries.

I turned around to find Sir Leonhart looking concerned. *I must have been pulling quite the distraught face.*

"Are you feeling ill?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine."

I forced myself to smile, but Sir Leonhart's disquieted look didn't disappear.

However, he left the matter there, probably realizing that I didn't want to talk about it.

I also apologized to George, who was sitting opposite me. "Sorry. Please, continue."

He was looking at me with concern, but I urged him to resume the conversation.

This isn't the time to be caught up in my personal emotions. Pull yourself together, Rose.

"Although we've discovered the principal ingredient, the method of manufacture and the other ingredients remain unknown," George explained. "Therefore, our next action will be to locate the medicine's place of origin." He sprawled a map across the tabletop. "The information that Michael has provided us suggests that the tree is usually found growing in high-elevation areas."

"By 'high-elevation,' do you mean near these mountains?" I pointed to the mountain range on the map that straddled the borders of Nevel, Schner, Vint, and Skelluts.

However, George cupped his chin with his hand and frowned. "As the medicine treats fevers, I'd expect the south to be the more likely origin, rather than the north."

After a few seconds of thought, I slid my finger down from its place north of Nevel on the map toward the southwest part of Flanmer.

"A mountain range in the south... There's one in the southwest of the Kingdom of Flanmer." I raised my head from the map and looked back to George.

"There is," he replied with a large nod. "Not to mention, the sailors who initially possessed the medicine were sailing on a ship from Flanmer. Our investigation should start there first."

I expressed my agreement with George's explanation. "That makes sense."

Still... Flanmer, eh? Obviously, I've never been there before.

As I stared at the map, I recalled some text from *Hidden World* that I'd filed away in the back of my mind.

Flanmer was a kingdom located to the southwest of Vint. Any land expedition from Nevel to Flanmer would necessitate crossing the Vint-Skelluts border. Flanmer was a massive country that possessed the third-largest amount of territory on the continent, but one-fourth of its land was dominated by a desert that expanded across the southeast. Surrounded on three sides by the sea, Flanmer boasted thriving fishery and shipbuilding industries.

Since it was one of the few matrilineal societies on the continent, the right of succession to the throne was passed down through their princesses. My understanding was that, at present, the husband of the current queen had passed away at an early age; Flanmer's queen had then assumed the role of sovereign for the intervening years while the young princesses and princes grew up.

However, this situation was incredibly rare—usually, the husband of the princess who'd inherited succession rights would become the reigning king.

But that was all that I could remember. I only had the sort of surface-level knowledge that you'd pick up in history class.

I need more. We'd better have a language in common with the locals. And how does it fare for law and order? What's the current political climate? And the actual climate? Are there any safe roads leading to the mountain range?

I think I'll start with some information gathering...

"Before we go, I'd first like to research Flanmer a bit more," I declared, my mind made up, but George looked astonished for some reason.

"Huh...?" A dazed sound escaped George's throat.

What's got you acting so shocked? Don't stare at me so much... It's making me uncomfortable.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

George's brows furrowed. He suddenly looked more serious. After mulling his words for a moment, he opened his mouth to speak.

“Lady Mar—” George started to say my name but then tried to obscure that by clearing his throat. “Your Highness. I ask you to leave what follows to us.”

“Sorry?”

“We don’t know what dangers await us in Flanmer. It’s not safe enough for you to go.” George said this softly, but decisively.

The look of fierce determination that I saw in his eyes reminded me of Michael.

It’s the same look, I thought.

George’s eyes seemed to quietly abandon me, just as Michael’s had in the greenhouse.

And there was another sense of déjà vu that flashed across my mind, beyond even my conversation with Michael from a month before: it was the feeling that I was being cast out and excluded, just as I’d been during the sorcerer abduction plot.

The Son of a Marquis Struggles

I placed my hand on the windowpane and gazed through it.

A single carriage was traveling away beneath the sky dyed orange by the sun in the west. My fingers pressed harder against the window as if to chase the carriage while it gradually shrank into the distance. My body heat warmed the cool glass, causing the scenery beyond to become hazy as the window fogged up. Even after the carriage eventually vanished from sight, hidden behind buildings, I remained standing by the window longingly.

“Was that the right choice, George?”

I jumped when I heard my name called. My reaction was less the result of being surprised at the sudden voice, and more the result of distress—there had been unwanted witnesses to my pining.

I’d been acting pathetic. Pushing her away one minute and then longingly watching her carriage leave. I didn’t want anybody to see me behaving in such an unmanly fashion.

“Was *what* the right choice?” I responded curtly.

I released my hands from the windowpane slowly, to obscure my distress. My aim had been to appear unaffected, but the mist on the glass outlining the shape of my palm refused to disappear. It was a cruel demonstration of my wretchedness.

I turned around to confront the man who was talking to me and pointed an exceptionally sharp glare at him.

However, my uncle Julius seemed unperturbed and continued to speak. “About Lady Mary, of course.”

I frowned. He’d gone straight to the topic that I was hoping to avoid. After being momentarily at a loss for words, I scowled and deflected the question. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

My uncle still didn't break his composed expression. "Oh dear. Is my nephew so slow-witted that I have to break this incredibly simple idea down and explain it in minute detail?" He grinned sweetly and tilted his head to one side. "Or does he just want me to indulge his desire not to speak about it? Perhaps it's too embarrassing for him?" Julius spewed his insults while smiling like a young noble lord.

I fell silent.

My uncle had the appearance of a kind man, but his personality was more complex than that. He'd decisively rejected my response, refusing to let me have my way.

"I merely updated her on the progress of the investigation," I said reluctantly. However, as I should have expected, it'd take more than that bland answer to satisfy my uncle.

"That doesn't make sense. Why would Lady Mary appear so upset over a mere progress report?"

"That's, uh..."

"And you see, I could've sworn by the look on Lady Mary's face that one proud fool or another had taken over and apparently made all the decisions without stopping to ask her opinion."

"You speak as though you witnessed it," I replied, barely refraining from grimacing. Although I was cursing him in my mind, on the outside, I plastered on a smile.

My uncle softly returned my smile, and it was different from the contemptible grin that he'd been wearing a moment before. Seeing that, I found myself at a loss for words.

"I wouldn't peek," he said. "I have better manners than that. But I don't need to have witnessed the scene to know the sorts of things you'd say."

My gaze started to fall to the floor. I felt ravaged by guilt, as though I'd been discovered while trying to cover up a blunder. When I raised my head to shake off that feeling, I said, "I told her that I'd like her to refrain from involving herself with the on-site investigation."

I didn't doubt my decision; we couldn't take Lady Mary with us to a place potentially rife with unknown dangers. *We* would take action, and she would wait for our report in the safety of her palace. That was how it ought to be.

Or at least, I'd thought so. But I couldn't erase the image of Lady Mary's shocked face that had seared itself into my mind. After I'd told her to leave the investigation to us, her face had distorted with sadness.

Why doesn't anything ever go right? I didn't want to upset her.

"I see," my uncle grumbled in a low tone of voice.

My cheeks lit up red. He wasn't even criticizing me, but I felt terribly embarrassed all the same. That might have been the guilt.

"It should be indisputable that we can't have Her Highness accompany us into danger," I blurted out as if making excuses.

"I didn't say that your view was wrong."

"But you're not saying that it's right either, are you?" I immediately spat these words back. My uncle just looked at me with exasperation.

"You're a dog with a bone today," he said. "Although, you're right. I see things slightly differently from you."

"Meaning what?" I sent him a piercing glare, but he shrugged it off and continued.

"Exactly what it sounds like. In the first place, I think that you're jumping to conclusions by assuming that Flanmer is dangerous."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but the current sovereign of Flanmer is a queen. Interregnums are notoriously unstable. It's safe to assume that Flanmer is dangerous."

"It's stable at present."

"That may be so, but anything could happen in the future."

My uncle sighed. "By that reasoning, Lady Mary would be forbidden from going *anywhere*. Nowhere in this world is entirely free from danger. Anything could happen at any time, anywhere, and nobody can predict it. Can you swear

to me that bandits won't storm this mansion right now, while we're here talking? You can't even guarantee that a meteor won't plummet from the sky and crush us to death."

"Enough sophistry," I said.

"That's right, it's sophistry," he continued calmly, not raising his voice. "But in broad terms, your argument is no different. There's caution, and then there's paranoia. You might think that you're protecting her, but that's egotistical of you. You're merely caging your precious Lady Mary to achieve your own peace of mind."

"That's not what I'm after!" I bit back instinctively. "Her Highness is far more important than we are. Even the slightest risk of danger is grounds to leave without her. Besides, as long as we ultimately procure the medicine without her having to lift a finger, nothing more is needed. The means aren't important—results are."

"*George*," my uncle said disapprovingly.

"I'll leave the discussion here. If you have nothing else to say, then I'll take my leave." I finished speaking, putting the conversation to rest, and then sped past my uncle. I didn't want any more cracks in the determination of my heart.

"Is the first woman that you fell in love with truly the sort to be content with peace in confinement?" he asked as I walked away.

I closed the door behind me without answering, then marched in retreat down the corridor. All the while, my uncle's words resounded in my mind.

The Reincarnated Princess Makes a Request

A map rustled as Sir Leonhart spread it across the tabletop. His hands were covered in white gloves, and they smoothed across the paper, flattening out the folds.

At the moment, we were the only two inside of the break room adjoining the greenhouse. The two sorcerers were busy training, and I'd asked my guard, Klaus, to gather some documents for me.

I'd been recently asking Sir Leonhart to act as my guard more frequently. Klaus used to grumble every time I sidelined him, but he'd stopped now. Apparently, I'd finally gotten him to see things my way. That, or he'd found a new kink in being neglected. Hopefully it was the former...

"Princess." Sir Leonhart gestured with his eyes toward the map, and I stared down at it.

This wasn't a map of the whole continent, or even one spanning the entirety of the Kingdom of Nevel; it depicted only an enlarged view of the eastern half of Nevel. That was fine, as all we needed for this discussion was to reference the area near the border of Nevel and Lapter.

I shifted my gaze toward the northeastern portion of the map, which was the region where Nevel and Lapter shared a border. However, at that moment, a black blob obscured my vision.

I gasped, but my surprise was over shortly, as I quickly discerned what had blocked my view of the map. I let out a sigh, then grasped the black blob with my fingertips and felt a sensation like deluxe velvet.

"*Nerooo*," I quietly called out to the blob—my cherished cat.

Nero, however, seemed entirely unalarmed and turned around to face me with a carefree *meow*. His sapphire eyes gazed up at me, brimming with curiosity.

Ever since his wounds had healed and he'd regained the ability to roam

around on his own, Nero had spent almost every day trotting along after me. I just assumed that he had a naturally curious disposition. He never acted timidly when arriving in places he'd never been to before, and would enjoy exploring.

I'd heard the saying that dogs take to people while cats take to homes, but this cat was the exception. It could also be that, to him, this whole palace was one big home... That thought was extraordinary in itself though.

"No climbing on tables."

I reached my hand out to remove him from the map, but he glided past my fingers. Then, to my alarm, he fled toward Sir Leonhart.

"Nero!"

He rubbed himself against Sir Leonhart's arm, oblivious to my shaken reaction. Sir Leonhart blinked a few times in surprise, then softly narrowed his eyes and scratched Nero's chin with his fingertips.

"He's friendly, isn't he?" Sir Leonhart said. He gazed tenderly at Nero, who was purring delightedly.

What a lovely sight. I stared, helplessly entranced.

But Nero had his own plans. He began to climb onto Sir Leonhart's shoulders.

"Oh my," Sir Leonhart remarked.

"Wha... Nero?!"

The cat's light-footed jump from Sir Leonhart's arm to his shoulder, reminiscent of a certain fox-squirrel, panicked me.

I know you're friendly, but don't go overboard! You don't have to copy everything about me!!!

"I'm sorry, Sir Leon!"

"No, it's all right. I usually frighten small animals, so if anything, I'm actually pleased." He gently stroked Nero's head, and the cat wove himself around Sir Leonhart's neck like a black scarf, seemingly in full relaxation mode.

"I suppose we can leave him up there until he gets fed up," I said, smiling. But given how comfortable he looked, that would probably take quite some time.

My rival for Sir Leonhart's heart turned out to be...my cat! My, er, *male* cat... Never mind.

"Let's continue where we left off," Sir Leonhart prompted.

As he gazed down at the map with Nero still on his shoulders, I followed his example and dropped my eyes down to look.

The topic of today's discussion was, of course, the demon lord. Our goal was to find the place where he'd been sealed away.

"I believe you said that the temple we're looking for was around here," Sir Leonhart said, pointing to a spot near the border with Lapter and tracing a large circle with his finger.

"Yes. It should be near a border village."

It sounded simple to say "near the border," but that covered a wide area. It wouldn't be an easy task; even just searching the villages that met the condition of having a dilapidated shrine on their outskirts would take considerable effort. Much time would be needed to investigate each of the villages scattered along the border. That said, we couldn't simply neglect our search for the medicine.

"Even if we manage to narrow the possibilities down further," said Sir Leonhart, "we won't be able to avoid asking for *some* assistance from someone."

"You're right," I agreed, but I had nobody in mind who could help. However, although I was stumped by the sudden dead end, Sir Leonhart had a solution ready.

"I have an old friend... He's the leader of a border defense regiment based out of a fortress in the northeast." He pointed to the top right of the map. "Around here. If you think it's wise, we could ask him to investigate while his company is performing marching maneuvers."

"That would be extremely helpful, but are you sure it's all right? Won't it interfere with his duties?"

"No need to worry. We won't have him prioritize it over his maneuvers or

security duties. And...there's another matter that I'd like him to look into."

I wonder what that is? I glanced up and shot Sir Leonhart a questioning look, but he didn't elaborate. He must've decided that it should wait.

"In that case, please do." I gave a deep bow of my head, and Sir Leonhart nodded.

He'll tell me when the time comes if need be. With that conviction in my heart, I decided not to mention it further.

"Now, about the medicine..." Sir Leonhart changed the topic, but his words trailed off. He looked at me with a sympathetic gleam in his pitch-black eyes.

He knew that I was upset about George's decision to remove me from the search for the medicine. After all, I hadn't spoken a single word during our ride back from Lord Julius's mansion. I'd probably made him worry about me.

I picked up where Sir Leonhart had left off. "I hear that George and Michael have departed."

The two of them had left for Flanmer on a hunt for the medicine. I'd assumed that Michael would have his movement more heavily regulated, given that he was an apprentice sorcerer, but apparently he had some degree of freedom in that regard. Unlike Lutz and Teo, Michael had no propensity for offensive magic, so he wasn't deemed to be dangerous. The distinction between white and black in the color of their robes was used to mark that difference.

"They've left me behind," I said jokingly with a grin, but Sir Leonhart didn't look happy.

"Princess..." His voice was etched with sorrow.

I hurriedly shook my head in denial. "Just to be clear, I'm not sulking. And I haven't given up either."

"Huh?" Sir Leonhart seemed taken aback.

"I *was* upset about them excluding me, but the more I think about it, I see that it's a bit late for that."

"Late?" Sir Leonhart asked, confused.

“Yes, that’s right,” I confirmed. “So long as I’m a princess, people will always try to distance me from danger. So, if I give up, then my journey will stop here. I finally understand—if I don’t want to back down, then I need to take action myself. Otherwise I won’t get anywhere.”

So what if they’ve left me out? Do I wait around for someone to reopen that door for me? No. If I want back in, I just need to let myself in. If I freeze up every time someone pushes me away, I’ll never get anywhere.

I want to change the future, and I vowed not to give up on Sir Leonhart.

So, I need to get stronger. Strong enough to keep moving forward, no matter what happens.

My nerves caused my heart to beat rapidly. I clutched at my chest and looked up at him. “I don’t want to give up... Will you help me?”

He narrowed his eyes kindly and smiled. Although I wasn’t ecstatic about him looking at me with the sort of pride he’d show to a child who’d taken a big step forward, I couldn’t help but feel good at the warmth in his expression.

“Of course. That’s why I’m here—to assist. Ask anything of me, and it will be done.”

After hearing his encouragement, I exhaled a relieved sigh.

I’d decided to follow George and Michael to Flanmer, but I wasn’t sure which method of travel to take.

About a thousand kilometers lay between Nevel’s capital and the border with Flanmer. However, that was only if we traveled in a perfectly straight line. Accounting for the hills, valleys, and curves along the roads, the distance would be greater.

So walking was, as could be imagined, off of the table. Riding by carriage would be the simplest method, if not for the excruciatingly tedious legal formalities that crossing two countries would entail; a journey over land to Flanmer would necessitate crossing the borders of both Vint and Skelluts.

At that point, the idea of traveling by boat came to my mind. If we departed

from a port in the southwest of Nevel and took a boat destined for a port in the west of Flanmer, we could reduce much of that tedious work.

Unfortunately, there was one problem.

Ships in this world were almost exclusively merchant or military vessels. There were no passenger ships running regular, time-tabled journeys. Merchant vessels would sometimes allow passengers on board if—and only if—there was plenty of space in the cargo bay.

In short, we'd need to procure a boat in order to use the waterways.

Lord Julius emerged in my mind as my best bet. I couldn't think of anyone else I knew who could get us on board a merchant vessel. Though I would've preferred not to bother him, I ultimately decided to pay him a visit. Fortunately, Lord Julius hadn't accompanied George to Flanmer, so he was still in Nevel at the moment—now would be my chance to ask. I would feel bad making him cancel his other engagements and return to his family's mansion just for us.

So instead...I went to him! After arranging to meet Lord Julius at the location of one of his business ventures, I arrived in the port city of Tao. This was the gateway to the sea, a city located to the south of the capital.

The moment that I descended from the carriage, I was greeted by the powerful smell of the salt breeze. Looking down from the old cobblestone-paved path on the hill, I spotted some buildings, and through the gaps between those buildings, I could see a wall of blue touching the horizon.

"It's the sea..."

This was my first time seeing the ocean since my rebirth into this world. I'd traveled to beaches now and then during my life in Japan, but the sea had never looked so crystal clear. It was more turquoise than blue, and the glittering sparkles on the water captivated me for some time.

"Lady Mary."

I turned around when I heard my name and found Sir Leonhart peering down at me. He always looked great in his knight's uniform, but I was also a fan of his current outfit: a bluish-black long coat over a gray shirt. The way he addressed me was different as well, and the change was a little thrilling. *Well, he's only*

calling me “Lady Mary” because we need to be incognito.

I was so happy about having a day out with Sir Leonhart as my guard that my heart seemed about to burst.

However, my personal guard hadn’t seemed anywhere near as pleased when we’d left him behind. The face that Klaus had made right before we’d gone flashed through my mind. Just a few days before, I’d thought that I’d gotten him to see things my way, but I’d apparently been wrong about that. He might’ve stopped complaining directly about Sir Leonhart, but it seemed like he still had some grievances.

“Have a safe trip,” he’d stated with a respectful bow of his head, but the look that he’d given Sir Leonhart hadn’t been pretty. Calling it a “glare” wouldn’t be an exaggeration. The memory gave me a headache.

“Stay close to me.”

Sir Leonhart’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?!” When I glanced over, I saw that he was holding out his hand toward me.

He was telling me to stay close and extending his hand. Putting those two facts together, I realized what he intended. My face lit up.

You’re letting me hold your hand?!

Intoxicated by the thought, I moved to take his hand but hesitated.

I doubt that anybody will recognize me as a princess while I’m wearing this extremely simple sky-blue apron dress, but even so, I have to account for everything. Besides, it’ll be bad if anyone thinks that Sir Leonhart is a child snatcher. Well...perhaps I’m not the best person to say that, given my eager romantic advances toward him.

Such were the stupid thoughts giving me pause. If I’d been more levelheaded, I would’ve realized... Nobody will assume that Sir Leonhart is a pedophile just for holding hands with me. We’d probably look like siblings with a large age gap or a young father on a day out with his daughter.

But, as I’ve written, I was intoxicated. My lovestruck heart had no room left

for common sense.

And so, of course, I wasn't paying any attention to my surroundings either.

"Pardon me," Sir Leonhart said, swooping me up.

"Whoa?!"

The very next second, a huge man carrying a basket charged through the spot where I'd been standing. It took a few seconds before I realized that Sir Leonhart had lifted me up to keep me from getting bowled over.

"Th-Thank you, Sir Leon..." I expressed my gratitude, blushing with embarrassment for not paying attention.

"You're very welcome." A gentle smile graced his dashing features. Since he was holding me in his arms, I was exposed to that expression at point-blank range. Looking at it directly almost blinded me.

Too bright!!! It's so divine, I have to shield my eyes!

I prayed for him to let me down, for my own heart's well-being, but instead, he began to walk along with me still in his arms. He descended the narrow stairway down from the hill, boots thudding against the ground.

"Umm, S-Sir Leon...? I-I can walk on my own now..."

"So let me down," I finished, but I feared that my volume had fallen too low to be heard above the clamor of the port city.

Sir Leonhart had heard me, but he looked up with a frown. "Please endure this until we reach our destination," he said soothingly. I was given no choice but to stop protesting.

This was an act of kindness from him. He'd come to the conclusion that if I were left to potter about on my own in my absentminded state, I'd get separated from him. That was a fair enough assumption since I'd been too engrossed with my thoughts a moment ago and had nearly collided with someone. I had no lay of the land here, so losing sight of Sir Leonhart would be a surefire way to end up lost.

So, I'll have to ignore my extreme embarrassment and let him carry me, I told myself. After a few false starts, I laid my hands on Sir Leonhart's shoulders, and

when I did, he smiled as if to say, *Well done*.

He *was* doting on me, in a sense...but I was clearly being given the child treatment.

I'm happy, but this isn't quite what I wanted...

I heaved a mental sigh. Even though I'd achieved the feat of physical contact with the man that I loved, I couldn't just sit back and enjoy it. I didn't want to settle for being carried around like a child. After all, I *was* nearly thirteen. It was worrisome that he might never really view me as a woman.

My bottom lip jutted out in a bit of a pout, and Sir Leonhart pointed a concerned look my way.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"N-N-Not at all! I just had something on my mind."

I rushed out a denial, but Sir Leonhart wasn't convinced. He seemed deep in thought, and while watching him, I prayed that he would leave the question alone.

I don't wanna tell my dream man that I'm upset because he's treating me like a child. That'd be too pathetic.

"Lady Mary."

"Huh?" My head popped back up instinctively when I heard my name.

Sir Leonhart pointed upward in silence. I followed the direction of his finger with my eyes and gazed up at the sky. The sunlight was dazzling, beaming down upon us, and I squinted into the light. Then, something white passed over my head. I saw a flock of birds soaring out toward the sea, flapping in formation while sounding a distinctive catlike cry. These were black-tailed gulls, flying unimpeded above the town and its scenic patchwork of orange roofs. The sight would've been perfect for a postcard.

"Wow...!" I let out a cry of wonder. Being in Sir Leonhart's arms meant that my field of vision was greatly elevated from its usual height. I felt that I could almost reach out and touch the birds. "Did you see that, Sir Leon? They were so close!"

“They were.”

“And they meowed! It sounded adorable.”

“Some people call them ‘sea cats’ because of their feline cries.”

So they have the same nickname here as in Japan. I wonder if this world also has black-headed gulls?

“There is no shortage of *real* cats either,” Sir Leonhart said. “Over there, see?”

“Really? Where...? Ah!”

I looked again in the direction where he’d pointed, and I saw several cats enjoying a nap on one of the roofs. There were three of them in a bundle using each other as pillows—a brown tabby, a calico, and a white cat. Just the look of sheer comfort on their faces sent a feeling of warmth bubbling through me.

“So adorable,” I whispered softly as my face broke into an uncontrollable smile.

Sir Leonhart observed me with a faint look of surprise.

Oh, er... Did I say something inappropriate? Or maybe I looked really weird?

Sir Leonhart’s sudden cessation of movement filled me with anxiety and I slapped my forehead. But my insignificant apprehension was nullified a moment later.

“Yes, adorable indeed,” Sir Leonhart said softly while sporting a bewitching smile.

Please don’t say that with such a gentle voice and such a sweet face... I’m not confident that I won’t delude myself into thinking that you’re talking about me.

I felt so abashed that I had to look somewhere else, so I turned my eyes away from him and took visual refuge in the scenery.

The terrain of Tao was hilly and uneven. Roads and stairways were erected on steep slopes, interweaved between the houses, and formed a complex web. Moreover, all the houses shared the same aesthetic: white walls and orange roofs constructed with terra-cotta bricks.

“This place is a maze.”

I'd been speaking to myself, but Sir Leonhart heard me and provided some commentary. "It is. Most people lose their way on their first visit. Once you've entered the system of alleys, you basically need a guide to find your way out. People who aren't properly acquainted with the city tend to utilize the stairs at the cost of a longer journey."

We were currently descending those stairs, which had been built alongside a short stonework wall, and the elevation offered us a relatively good view over the city. Sir Leonhart's comment explained the rather heavy traffic on these stairs—they circumnavigated the city's center, so one could avoid getting lost by taking them. The city layout was constructed so that travelers well accustomed to the geography could, by contrast, navigate the tangle of alleys in the city center to reach any destination.

So basically, you can take your pick of routes, just as long as you internalize a mental map. This city is such an interesting case of urban planning, I thought. It's like a dungeon from a role-playing game.

"It's kind of exciting," I said.

"Exciting?"

"Yes. I feel like I'm on an ad...venture..."

I'd let my honest thoughts slip out, but I immediately realized how childish I'd sounded. *So walking down a flight of stairs is an adventure now? How old am I, three?*

Although I was ashamed of my immaturity, my belief was sincere: this *was* an adventure. The scenery in my life so far had mostly consisted of palace walls, so this tangled web of a city was a fine setting for an adventure. Who needed monsters or treasure?

I worried that Sir Leonhart might've thought that my wonder was silly, but he didn't laugh. "I know the feeling. When I was a child, I got lost here once. Oh, that turned into a little escapade..." From the look in his eyes, he didn't appear to be teasing me. He spoke of his memories with a nostalgic smile.

"Did you lose sight of your parents?" I asked.

"Yes. On purpose."

“On purpose?” I repeated with a tilt of my head.

Sir Leonhart looked at me and chuckled heartily. “As a child, I was a bit of a handful. Restless, and endlessly curious. I intentionally strayed from my parents so that I could explore the city.”

“Wait, really?” I asked, shocked. I never would’ve guessed that Sir Leonhart had been a restless child. “Didn’t they tell you off?”

“Oh yes, they absolutely did. My father thumped me and said, ‘It’s bad enough that you wandered off, but how dare you get your little brothers lost!’” Sir Leonhart then nonchalantly said, “I protested that I hadn’t taken them, but they’d just followed. That response earned me another punch.”

My surprise was inconceivable. This young Leonhart was a completely different person from the Sir Leonhart in my mind. Strangely though, my feelings didn’t sour. If anything, my blood was pumping even faster at the thought that I’d discovered a new facet of his nature.

I wonder if he was the leader of the pack in his day? I bet that, on the outside, he grumbled and complained at his brothers when they tagged along—but I’m sure he still watched out for them. Oh, I wish I could’ve seen him. The hyperactive Sir Leonhart, who all the other kids looked up to.

I have to say though, I’m amazed to find out that the venerable Orseins used to be quite the aggressive family. I hope I get to meet his parents someday. Er, I don’t mean I want to meet them as his bride or anything audacious like that... Except, maybe a tiny bit.

“There we go, we’ve reached the bottom,” Sir Leonhart announced.

I was still daydreaming by the time we’d finished descending the stairs.

“Thank you very much. I should be all right to walk on my own from now—”

“Please wait a little longer. We are currently in the worst place for losing sight of one another.”

“Very well...” I didn’t want him to carry me for much longer, but my pride succumbed to the power of his smile.

That said, Sir Leonhart could well have been correct. The moment that we set

foot onto a wider path, the stream of people grew incomparably denser. Carts and donkeys loaded with goods squeezed through the jostling crowds. The eaved shops lining either side of the road were overflowing with customers. Their wares were all rare items the likes of which I'd never seen before, and they were stacked high. It wasn't hard to imagine myself getting distracted and ending up lost.

I found myself overwhelmed by the busy streets. "It won't be easy to spot Lord Julius here."

Sir Leonhart, however, continued forward, confident on his feet. "I'm afraid not. Although, we do know what landmarks to watch out for, so I'm sure that we'll manage."

Among a stretch of buildings that were the same height, one poked out taller than the rest. We turned the corner there and spotted one of the landmarks—a signboard for a restaurant—then made another left turn, after which we proceeded down a narrow alleyway for a little while.

"It should be around here..." Sir Leonhart mused, casting his eyes across our surroundings as he walked.

I followed his example and pivoted my head left, right, up, and down, inspecting the area.

"Aha!" I exclaimed.

"Have you spotted him?"

"I think I saw him in the shop we just walked past."

We reversed a few steps and peered inside. I could see a tall man standing in the back. His posture was great, and he looked beautiful in his well-tailored camel coat. His jawline and the bright, light-brown hair that he'd combed back seemed familiar to me. He *looked* like Lord Julius, but I'd need to see him from the front to have any conviction.

The man was deep in conversation with someone and remained steadfastly facing away from us. I could've simply walked inside and checked, but I didn't want to deal with the awkward aftermath if he were actually the wrong person.

Come on, lemme at least see the side of your face, just so I know who you are...

As if answering my prayer, the man shifted his stance. I sighed with relief as I recognized his face. "It is Lord Julius."

Thank goodness, we managed to find him.

"He seems to be talking with someone though," Sir Leonhart pointed out. "Maybe we should wait for the time being?"

"Yes," I agreed, nodding.

We mustn't interfere with his work.

"Let's find somewhere to pass the time," Sir Leonhart said, turning to leave.

As I was about to reply, I glanced back toward Lord Julius once more. Due to his new stance, his conversation partner had entered my view: a young woman.

I tilted my head in silence, puzzled, though not because Lord Julius was talking to a woman. It was true that I'd assumed he was discussing business, and so I'd pictured his contact as a brawny middle-aged man. The gender of the other person, however, wasn't what seemed odd to me.

I could swear I've seen her before... Or am I just imagining things?

"Sir Leon?" I called, and Sir Leonhart stopped.

"Yes?"

"Sorry, but could we go back to the store?"

"We...can," Sir Leonhart replied, seeming confused.

We backtracked to the storefront and peered inside again.

Will it come back to me if I get another look?

I trudged through my memories while staring—rather rudely—at the woman's face. But I had no luck. My recollection of her couldn't have been recent; her beauty was the sort that would imprint in people's minds forever after a single sighting. Even so, I couldn't place her face. I furrowed my brows, struck with an unpleasant feeling like I had a small bone stuck in the back of my throat.

Where have I seen her? I asked myself as I scrutinized her face.

She was in her late teens. Her black hair flowed in bountiful waves, and the corners of her amber eyes slanted upward. Her imposing brows bestowed a strong-willed impression, and she had finely chiseled facial features. Her glistening red lips, along with the mole beneath and to the left of them, were particularly sexy. Her proportions were outstanding, and the curves flowing from her shapely, buxom breasts to her slender waist were beautiful. The sleeveless navy-blue dress she wore was simple but drew attention to her fabulous good looks.

I was sure that her smile would be alluring, but unfortunately, she was unamused at the moment. That said, her anger didn't detract from her charm. If anything, it enhanced her fierce beauty.



Nothing packs as much of a punch as a stunner who's angry... I thought absentmindedly, and at that moment, an image swirled into my mind, striking me with the force of a lightning bolt: Michael the demon lord, smiling sweetly as the wind swept through his long black hair, and the crescent moon behind him. A woman stood in confrontation with him, glowering and glaring while shielding a girl behind her.

"That's who she is..." I muttered in a daze.

It now made sense why I'd taken so long to remember her. These weren't memories from a mere few years ago—they were from my *previous life*.

The woman inside the room was called Bianca von Diebolt. She was a side character who starred in Michael's route of *Welcome to the Hidden World*. Though she was younger now than she had been at the start of the game, there was no mistaking her. Or rather, there couldn't possibly be two different people as beautiful as that.

Why's Big Sis Bianca here...?

Despite my confusion, I peeked inside to see what was happening. Lord Julius and Bianca were still deep in conversation.

I'm sure that they weren't acquainted in Hidden World though...

While tilting my head, I rifled through the half-faded memories from my past life.

Bianca von Diebolt was born the eldest daughter of Viscount Diebolt and was Michael's older full sister. In the game, I seemed to recall that she'd been one or two years older than him. Although she was only a side character and had no screen time outside of Michael's route, players adored her. She was charming and caring, which earned her the nickname "Big Sis Bianca."

In the game, she'd been disconcerted by the metamorphosis of her once-timid little brother, but had been unable to prove her suspicions. Cooperating with Bianca to uncover the truth behind her brother's change in demeanor formed the crux of Michael's route, aka the game's main route. This one offered plenty of reading material for the audience to feast their eyes on. There was much more content than in the game's other routes since it revolved

around the central figures of the story: the shrine maiden and the demon lord.

However, fifty or sixty—no, seventy—percent of the route was solely devoted to the partnership between the shrine maiden and Bianca.

Throughout the route, Bianca protected the shrine maiden from Michael as his true yandere nature gradually manifested itself. When the shrine maiden wailed that the prospect of uncovering the truth terrified her, Bianca set her straight, then pulled her into an embrace and consoled her. After crying her eyes out in Bianca's arms, the shrine maiden had then blushed and thanked her.

I'd have liked to interrogate the production staff on who the main character of that route actually was...

The point was to uncover Michael's secret, so I guess there was no way around it—but even so, it was ridiculous. How am I supposed to fall in love with a man who barely even turns up?

As it happened, many players believed that Bianca was the true suitor character, not Michael. Countless numbers of my fellow gamers despaired when they'd overcome every hurdle and had reached the ending, only for the final image to depict just Michael and the shrine maiden. The bug report forums were flooded with posts saying, "Michael's image is showing up at the end of Bianca's route." It hadn't been a bug though—it was by design.

Defies belief, I know. I'd forgotten how shitty that game was...

How novel, creating an otome game that people buy to experience a wonderful romance with hot guys but giving said hot guys no screen time. So novel, in fact, that you lost everybody.

"Lady Mary... Lady Mary."

"Huh? Oh, er, yes?"

Sir Leonhart's call tugged me back from memory lane. My head shot up and my eyes met his. He was smiling wryly. Then he gestured with his eyes and I looked where he instructed...right into a bout of eye contact with a stunningly beautiful woman.

I jumped.

She was staring intently at me through the store's glass window—it was Bianca.

When did she get so close...?

And what's with that excited look in her eyes?!

Now that Lord Julius had noticed my presence, I was beckoned inside the store.

The shop's interior was reasonably spacious; there were six seats at the bar and twenty other chairs around some tables. Judging from the wine glasses dangling from metal fixtures above the bar, and from the lines of wine bottles on the shelves, I imagined that this restaurant operated at night. The building's old age was apparent in the faded spots on the walls and the floor, but there wasn't a single speck of dust on the well-polished tables.

Lord Julius informed me that an acquaintance of his managed this restaurant. It was only open at night, as I'd guessed, so Lord Julius had arranged to use it for the day.

We seated ourselves at a table toward the back of the room and exchanged brief self-introductions. Although, I did shorten my name to "Mary" since I was supposed to be incognito. We went with the story that I was the daughter of one of Sir Leonhart's friends...which wasn't technically a lie, as long as the king and the royal guard captain could be considered friends.

I wanted to apologize for barging in without an appointment, so I said, "I'm sorry for coming uninvited."

However, Lord Julius just smiled and let me off. "Not at all. I'm delighted to see you."

What a gentleman, I thought while giving him a look of admiration.

Lord Julius turned his eyes away slightly and quietly whispered, "This helps me a great deal, in fact."

That wouldn't have anything to do with the woman currently staring at me like there's no tomorrow...would it?

Not long before I'd arrived, her brows had been furrowed in self-evident anger, but now, Big Sis Bianca was blushing and had a dreamy look in her eyes. She looked too sexy for me to bear, so I just had to look away.

"Um, Mary?" Bianca said with a slight tilt of the head.

"Mary?!" I exclaimed, startled. *She's talking to me, right?*

"Sorry, am I being too familiar?"

Watching Bianca shrink sadly, I frantically waved my hands. "N-Not at all!" I wasn't annoyed; the way she addressed me was just an unexpected and refreshing change of pace from "Lady Mary" or other formal titles.

"I like it," I said. "You can call me that if you want."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Then you can call me Bianca too."

"I'll do that, Bianca."

Her face crumpled in ecstasy when I followed her request. In the game, she'd given the men a run for their money with how valorous and dignified she'd looked. This might've been my first glimpse of her enchanting smile.

I'm getting the impression that Bianca likes kids.

"Mary, what do you like to eat?" she asked.

"Anything sweet," I answered.

"What's your favorite animal?"

"Cats."

"Oh? Tee hee hee!" Bianca smiled with her whole face.

To be honest, I'm getting a little scared. Not sure why, but I just am.

She posed another question. "What color do you like your dresses to be?"

"Blue."

Are these inquiries going to end at some point, or...?

Noticing the glassy look in my eyes, Lord Julius cleared his throat. “Forgive me for interrupting your conversation, but might we get to what we came here to discuss?”

Bianca shot Lord Julius an icy glare, and the contrast between that scowl and the warm look that she’d given me was like night and day. The atmosphere now felt so frigid that I was worried I’d catch a cold.

“That’s right,” Bianca said, “you still haven’t told me why your ships aren’t running.”

“Huh?” I interjected. Sir Leonhart and I exchanged a glance.

The ships aren’t running? Why?

“We’ll get to that soon enough, but I still haven’t been told what I can do for Lady—” Lord Julius smiled awkwardly. “Er, for Mary.” I could see a slight grimace on his face, which clearly showed his regret. It was a little refreshing seeing a departure from his usual calm and elegant demeanor. However, I was in too much mental turmoil at that moment to savor his uncharacteristic expression.

“Yeah, we should find that out.” Bianca nodded sincerely. I’d decided to leave my comments for her until later as well.

“Why aren’t the ships running?” I asked, lurching forward desperately from my chair.

When he saw that, Lord Julius’s eyes widened with confusion. “Huh?”

His reaction made sense, as I hadn’t yet told him that I was after a ticket onto one of his ships. I realized that I should’ve waited to ask until after I’d explained my purpose, but I’d gotten the order wrong and it was now too late to change that.

Seeing that I wasn’t sure how to reply, Sir Leonhart entered the fray. “Pardon me, but would you be able to tell us about the problem with the ships?”

“Of course, but what about your request?” Lord Julius asked.

“We’ll explain afterward,” Sir Leonhart replied.

Lord Julius nodded after some thought. “Very well.”

He told us of an ominous rumor that had originated from a certain ship. About a month before, a ship hailing from an island far to the continent's southeast arrived at a small port in Grundt, which was a nation to Nevel's east. It must have been quite the lengthy voyage, given the great distance traveled, but the ship itself was in good condition. Mysteriously though, over half of the sailors were on the verge of death. Three deaths were recorded upon their arrival. Of the other fifteen stricken sailors, six eventually passed away after not responding to medical treatment.

A rumor had begun to spread among the sailors who'd read the ship's logbook: those who stay at sea for too long are haunted by ghosts.

"Is it not a disease then?" Sir Leonhart asked.

"I couldn't say. We don't have a clear idea about that at present," Lord Julius replied noncommittally. "If it is a disease though, it doesn't seem likely to spread from person to person. Nobody in Grundt has developed those symptoms, and that includes doctors, caregivers, and the people who buried the bodies."

So at the least, it's not a disease that's airborne or spread through physical contact. Even so, more than half the crew of a single ship contracted the same disease—it makes me wonder whether there's a different route of infection. Like maybe their water or food supplies were contaminated.

Cogs whirled in my brain as I silently listened to everyone else. My attention had been focused on the ships at first, but if this disease was in fact infectious, then it would become my priority. After all, the theory that I'd conjectured from my knowledge of *Hidden World* was just a theory, and it was entirely possible that the disease could spread from a different place at a different time.

"It's understandable that sailors would be afraid of a rare disease of unknown cause...but there's quite a difference between that and the current rumor," Sir Leonhart remarked.

"Yeah. They're blaming ghosts? Where did that absurd idea come from?" Bianca expressed her agreement with Sir Leonhart, looking mystified.

Right, I don't see how to connect the dots there either.

I looked at Lord Julius and asked, “What was written in the ship’s logbook?”

He retrieved a notepad from his pocket and flicked through the pages. “At first, there was nothing you wouldn’t expect to find in any ship’s log. The date of departure, the weather, the calmness of the sea, the conditions of the crew... All mundane entries. But the first month passed, and then the second, and as the days went by, unusual occurrences began to sprout up.”

Lord Julius gave us a summarized explanation while scanning his notes, which appeared to contain a copy of the log.

“Members of the crew began to feel ill?” Bianca asked.

“Exactly,” Lord Julius said. “After the end of the first month, a growing number of crew members began to complain of joint pains and fatigue. The log records, ‘Probably just a cold. They’ll feel better after some rest.’ But contrary to their expectations, the afflicted crew showed no signs of improving. Their mental states began to deteriorate.”

Weariness and joint pains. That does sound like a normal cold.

But if rest didn’t alleviate their symptoms at all, then it’s likely that another disease was at work. If it were a cold, then usually resting would be enough to recover, unless you contracted pneumonia or another serious condition as a result.

“The next entry records a new symptom: the appearance of large thigh bruises.”

Bianca squinted in puzzlement. “Bruises? Are you sure they didn’t just bump into something?”

“It says that the symptoms appeared on several different people. I find it unlikely that all of them could’ve knocked their thighs simultaneously,” Lord Julius replied with composure. “Several days later, they began to bleed from their skin and gums. Eventually, the sailors’ teeth fell out, their old wounds reopened, and they died covered in blood.”

Everyone fell silent. Sir Leonhart’s expression looked grim, and Bianca blanched slightly. The description exceeded my every expectation, and I felt the color drain from my face as well.

Bianca shot Lord Julius a cold glare. “We can’t do anything about it now, but that’s not the sort of thing you should be letting Mary hear.”

I hurriedly shook my head. “No, it’s all right! I chose to be here, so don’t mind me.”

“But...” Bianca said, not relenting.

I smiled, hoping to calm her. *Not the most natural smile I’ve ever done, but let’s not mention that. Although Lord Julius’s tale wasn’t all that pleasant to listen to, it was necessary to hear,* I thought, and I believed that from the bottom of my heart.

“So their gruesome final days inspired the rumor that they were haunted by ghosts?” I asked.

“It wasn’t just that. Even among the seafarers of Nevel, there are no small number of people who’ve experienced the early stages of those symptoms. And as the number of days at sea increases, the number of sick sailors rises. They now fear that longer voyages will make them the next ones to die bloody deaths.”

So the rumor—those who stay at sea for long periods of time will become haunted by ghosts—arose because the rate of developing symptoms is proportional to the number of days at sea?

“The early symptoms? So fatigue and joint pains? Not exactly uncommon,” said Bianca.

Lord Julius heaved a long sigh. “It may simply be paranoia, but reasoning with them will be difficult unless we know the cause and how to treat it.”

“But the ships can’t stay grounded forever,” Bianca said. “That would impact business, not to mention the sailors’ livelihoods.”

“Of course,” Lord Julius agreed.

While listening to Bianca and Julius’s conversation, I sorted through the facts in my head.

“Hmm?” I mumbled.

“Lady Mary?” Sir Leonhart asked in a voice quiet enough for only me to hear.

He peered at me with concern, but I was too focused on getting my thoughts straight to return a proper reply.

First comes weariness and joint pain. Then mental instability... So, depression, followed by bruising on the femur. A few days after that, bleeding from the gums and skin. Their teeth fall out, old wounds reopen, eventually leading to death. That's the affliction the sailors had.

"Why does..." I started to say. *Why does this seem familiar?* I asked myself.

Suddenly, I found the answer in my mind. I had never witnessed a person with those symptoms, but I definitely recognized them. This wasn't a graphic memory gained from firsthand experience—it was just awareness.

"Lord Julius," I called.

"Yes?"

"How was the ship provisioned?"

Lord Julius blinked several times in surprise. Until then, I'd been staring at my shoes without participating in the conversation, so I expected that he was surprised at my sudden interest. But instead of questioning my abrupt entry into the conversation, Lord Julius peered down at the notebook in his hands.

"I wouldn't call their provisions sumptuous, but they had enough to stave off starvation on their long voyage. The sailors' meals were principally salted meat and fish, biscuits, cheese, and wine."

"So their foodstuffs were all long-lasting," I said. "And they didn't make any stops at ports along the way?"

"Going by the logbook, no. I'm not sure there were any ports where they *could've* stopped. I know of a few small islands between the southeast and the continent, but they're either uninhabited or home to insular indigenous peoples who preserve their own unique cultures. Intrusions onto their homeland could cause needless conflict."

It was an obvious risk to disembark onto those dangerous islands. Since their food stocks weren't in dire straits, did the sailors decide that there was no benefit to stopping?

“Out of interest, do the sailors in our kingdom consume similar food on their voyages?” I asked.

“Nevel’s? Let me think... I expect they eat food that’s much the same. Although, on longer voyages, they’ll make a few stops at different ports to replenish their supplies. When they do, crews usually get a few days of fresh meat and vegetables as well.”

“I thought so...” I muttered under my breath. That last part was the big distinction between Nevel’s sailors and the deceased.

Lord Julius heard me. “You thought so?”

I returned to my senses and shut my mouth, but the cat was already out of the bag. Everyone’s attention was centered on me.

I should’ve been more careful; the ideas aren’t organized straight in my head yet.

“Do you have an idea?” Lord Julius’s green eyes usually looked drowsy, but now they were glowing.

It feels like he’s expecting me to say something good... Am I right about that?

I gulped.

What should I say? How much can I tell them? And how am I going to prove it? I don’t have anything planned, but I’ll just have to go for it. Things are out of my control now, so let whatever happens, happen, I thought.

“I may know what that disease is.”

“What?!”

The only cry of surprise at my outrageous claim came from Bianca. Sir Leonhart merely widened his eyes slightly. Lord Julius grew even more excited.

Please don’t act like you think I’m about to solve everything. I gently rubbed my stomach, which had started to ache.

Bianca looked at me with unconcealed confusion. “Mary, what do you mean, you know it?”

“I know a disease that matches the symptoms that Lord Julius just described,”

I explained. “Although, I only know it from a book.”

Off the cuff, I could only think of two explanations as to why I possessed this knowledge: I could have learned it from either a person or a book. If I’d reported that somebody had told me, then everyone would have asked “who?” And because the list of people a sheltered girl like me could freely visit was rather short, only the second option was really available to me, practically speaking.

I’ll be done for if they ask me which book I found the information in, but I could try to bluff and say that I forgot... Couldn’t I? Maybe not.

“A book?” Bianca asked. “Are the books you read that complicated?”

Lord Julius answered Bianca’s question before I could. “I would wager that Mary is the most avid reader out of all of us. She reads not just books from Nevel, but ones from other countries as well. Right?” He looked to me for confirmation.

I nodded half-heartedly.

However, those foreign books are mainly the ones you bring to me, and there are a few that I’m still in the middle of. I can handle the ones written in the primary language of a major country, but it’s brutal of you to send me books written in a minor, derived language. If the book is related to my interests, I do dig my heels in and go through with a dictionary though.

Lord Julius’s assertion astonished Bianca. “You can understand foreign languages? That’s amazing! Even though you’re so small and cute that I could just gobble you up!”

Don’t eat me, please.

“Well, Mary is very diligent in her studies,” Lord Julius said, and his eyes were sparkling like a young boy’s. “Lately, every time I come across a rare book, I can’t help but think to myself, ‘Mary will definitely breeze through this.’ I always end up buying it to bring home as a present.”

Foreign books don’t strike me as the most appropriate present to give a child. Picture books, sure, but books on cooking and medicine? I thought that maybe he’d just wanted me to admire the pictures. I didn’t know that he’d been hoping

I could actually read them...

Sir Leonhart spoke up, moving the derailed conversation back on track. “We’ve drifted from the topic at hand.”

“Oh, my apologies...” Lord Julius calmed down after Sir Leonhart’s reminder. An embarrassed blush rose to his cheeks and he cleared his throat before speaking again. “So, Mary, could you elaborate?”

The spotlight was on me again, and I nodded. “The principal cause of this disease is diet.”

“Diet?” Bianca repeated.

I turned my eyes to her and continued. “Diets inevitably become unbalanced on longer voyages, right? We saw that in the logs that Lord Julius quoted.”

“Right,” Bianca said. “Fresh meat and vegetables will rot if you don’t eat them right away, so I suppose that, for the rest of the journey, sailors have to make do with wine and hard biscuits and other preserved food that lasts longer.”

“That can’t possibly be good for your health though, can it?” I asked.

“Well, no...” Bianca said, bewilderment appearing on her face.

“So you’re proposing that it’s malnutrition?” Julius asked.

I nodded firmly. “Yes. Unbalanced diets can harm one’s health.”

Once, back when I lived in Japan, I had to write a report for my world history class in high school. My topic had been the so-called Age of Exploration, aka the period from the fifteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century when explorers from European countries traveled the globe.

That era’s sailors feared pirates, but not as much as one particular disease. By the modern era, society had developed treatments for the disease—but back then, even the cause had been unknown. One example of this was the first voyage of European sailors through the sea route to India: out of the one hundred and eighty sailors on board, one hundred had died.

The disease that killed them? Scurvy.

This illness would be contracted after prolonged vitamin C deficiency. It was a

terrifying condition that began with weariness and joint pains, then progressed to bruising appearing on the femur, bleeding from the gums and skin, the loss of teeth, and eventually death.

Back to our conversation: Lord Julius was nodding in agreement at my assertion. “I’m well aware of how important nutrition is, especially after what happened to my sister-in-law.”

Emma—Lord Julius’s sister-in-law and George’s mother—saw an improvement to her health after reworking her diet and adding an ample amount of exercise into her routine. I almost reassured myself that having a real example so close to home would make Lord Julius receptive to my idea, but he quickly began to frown.

“However, it’s hard to believe that healthy adult men could die because of an unbalanced diet,” he said, looking troubled.

Yeah, I thought you might say that. Everyone knows you die if you eat nothing, but if a person is eating enough, it’s not as easy to grasp the concept of death by malnutrition. How should I address this?

I racked my brain while feeling the onset of a headache. “So, let’s say for instance... You’re making bricks. What materials do you use?”

“B-Bricks?” Bianca asked, taken aback by the sudden change of topic.

“Clay, sand, lime, and water, I believe,” Lord Julius answered, seeming puzzled.

“What would happen if you didn’t include one of those materials?” I asked.

“You need clay, otherwise you won’t get anywhere,” Sir Leonhart responded. “Without water it won’t mix properly. You should be able to bake the brick solid without sand or limestone, but it wouldn’t be a very good brick.”

Lord Julius continued Sir Leonhart’s line of thought. “The bricks would lack strength...” His words trailed off midway, as though an idea had suddenly popped into his head. “Ah, I see. You’re implying that the same is true for our bodies?”

“Yes. As with the bricks, I believe that cutting corners with nutrition weakens

our bodies. The effect is small at first—fingernails breaking more readily, hair becoming brittle, things like that. But the longer it lasts, the more our bodies will be affected, I think.”

I was desperate to get my point across.

It'd be so much easier if I could explain using modern-day terminology. I could say that shortages of vitamin C weaken capillaries and increase the risk of hemorrhages. Or that vitamin C is necessary for the biosynthesis of collagen.

But there was no way that I could rephrase that adequately in my own words. *Not my specialty. I was always more into literature and the arts, anyway.*

Lord Julius fell silent for a while as if in contemplation. His almost-translucent green eyes stared at me intently, and it felt like my soul was bare before him. My instincts urged me to look away, but I desperately persevered.

Finally, he spoke. “I understand.”

“Huh?” I blurted.

“I’ll believe you,” Lord Julius said. The sternness that had been present in his expression vanished, and he smiled.

“Umm, but... Are you sure that’s all right?” My voice lacked confidence. I had no evidence to prove my claim, nor any references to support it. I’d tried to at least bluff and act so self-assured that they’d have to believe me, but Lord Julius’s quick acceptance threw me off-balance.

When he saw me acting deflated, Lord Julius narrowed his eyes warmly. “We know neither the cause nor the treatment for the disease, but we can’t afford to do nothing either. The situation is already unfathomably dire, so it can’t get any worse.”

“I suppose not, but...”

“And there’s a hopeful part of me that thinks if *anyone* can turn the tables, it’ll be you.” Lord Julius winked playfully.

“You’re overestimating me,” I replied, but he neither agreed nor disagreed with that.

His brows drooped slightly, and he smiled apologetically. “I hope you’ll forgive

my little test—I just wanted to see whether my optimism was well founded. Would it be too much for me to hope that you know a remedy as well?”

That’s right. My end goal wasn’t convincing Lord Julius... That was only the start.

I put on a serious expression and nodded. “I do.”

The countermeasure for scurvy that I decided to propose was sauerkraut—pickled cabbage that is often served as a garnish for German cuisine.

It’s incredibly easy to make. First, you remove the cabbage’s core, and then you thinly slice the remaining leaves and massage plenty of salt into it. Afterward, you sterilize a jar with boiling water, transfer everything (including the juice) to the jar, then place a cap on the jar and weights on top. That’s all.

I wiped my hands with a tea towel and looked at Lord Julius. “It’ll be ready after you leave it to ferment for about a week. Just make sure it’s somewhere cool and out of the sun.”

He had a hand on his forehead, and his eyes were fixed on the jar containing the unfinished sauerkraut. “It’s remarkably simple.”

Lord Julius had immediately accepted my offer to prepare an example. Luckily, we were in a restaurant, so we took over the kitchen. He had seemed so excited when he’d asked what ingredients we would need. The prospect of some grand concoction must’ve set a fire in his merchant heart. The look on his face had told me that he’d ready any ingredients, no matter how impractical. I hadn’t felt great about raining on his parade, but I’d actually only needed cabbage and salt.

“Were you hoping for more?” I asked, wearing an awkward grin.

Lord Julius mimicked my expression. “To be truthful, I was.”

Maybe I should’ve requested caraway seeds or bay leaves. I sometimes add chili peppers too, when I make sauerkraut for myself.

However, on this occasion, simplicity mattered above all else. I wanted anybody anywhere to be able to make it themselves.

“Regardless, the small number of ingredients and the simple method will make mass production possible.”

“Yes.”

“Now we just need to figure out how to spread the word,” Lord Julius said.

I hesitated because I wasn’t trying to devise a method to make it popular—I’d already figured that part out. But to enact my plan, I’d needed Sir Leonhart and Bianca to leave the room. I was just feeling reluctant to reveal my brazen request, like I didn’t have quite enough courage.

I clenched my fists and pursed my lips, then after a loud gulp, I said, “Lord Julius?”

“Yes?”

“Please listen to my...request.”

Hearing my more formal tone, Lord Julius’s eyes first opened wide and then narrowed shrewdly. He looked serious now and gestured wordlessly for me to continue.

I mentally readied myself. “Would you mind stocking this as one of your products?”

Lord Julius looked aghast. “That’s an incredibly attractive proposal for me personally, but with the right handling, it could make you wealthy beyond compare. Are you sure that you’d rather give this opportunity to me?”

“However valuable it may be, I don’t have the means to make this remedy popular. And if I were to run around trying to teach people the recipe for free, I doubt that I could get anyone to believe me.”

I’d heard the saying “nothing costs as much as what is given to us,” so I worried that most people would be skeptical of a product given to them without charge. There’d be no point in me handing out the recipe if people suspected my motives. But that’s what experts are for. It would be better if an amateur like me didn’t try and bumble through business when asking a pro like Julius would yield more certain results.

“You’re well-connected, and you have a lot of customers that trust your

judgment. I know that I won't have to worry about you handling this well."

Lord Julius smiled. "It is a true honor to hear you say that." He looked at me with such a kind expression that the guilt ate at my heart.

I don't want to say this... But if I don't, then we'll get nowhere.

"However... I know it's one-sided of me, but I want to impose two conditions."

"Conditions?" Lord Julius repeated.

While he *was* surprised, he didn't seem offended.

"First, I'd like you to set a cheap price," I said. "I'm not foolish enough to ask you to purposefully make a loss though. Of course, you can compensate yourself for necessary expenditures like cost of materials, labor, and transport, and I don't mind you earning a profit on top..."

"But you want me to keep as tight a profit margin as possible."

"Yes..." My voice was so feeble that I didn't even recognize it as my own.

I knew that I was being unreasonable. With the right sales tactics, he could turn this product into gold, but I was asking him to forego most of that profit. To a merchant, those were practically fighting words.

"And the other condition?" Lord Julius asked, still composed, not raising his voice.

Was he angry? The vast difference in life experience between us made it more or less impossible for me to tell. Still unsure of whether the flames had reached the fuse to ignite his explosion, I threw more wood onto the fire. "With the product, I would like you to include a slip of paper containing the recipe, so that anybody can replicate it."

His green eyes flew wide open. The shock of this condition probably made the last one seem like nothing.

He might've been able to accept the first stipulation by reasoning that he was employing the strategy of low profits and quick returns. Demand would be high, and he'd have a monopoly on the sauerkraut. With enough skill, it'd be possible to make big returns.

However, the second condition demolished that premise. My proposal amounted to relinquishing his exclusive rights to the product and making it worthless.

My eyes slowly began to fall to the floor, as I was too scared to see his reaction. However, ashamed of my own cowardice, I quickly stood up straight.

“So that’s why...” Lord Julius mumbled. It sounded like he was talking to himself rather than answering my question.

“Huh?”

“I wondered why the recipe seemed so simple...so bland. You always went to so much trouble preparing the most complex meals to serve my sister-in-law. If you were making this as a meal for yourself, you’d expend the extra effort to make it even more delicious, wouldn’t you? So the reason why you didn’t do that and instead minimized the work needed to make this remedy was so that any person could make it themselves. Am I wrong?” Julius grinned, seeming a little proud of himself.

I nervously nodded. He was right—when I would make sauerkraut in my previous life, I’d add spices, as mentioned before.

“You are truly studious,” he said. “You don’t simply internalize what you learn, but instead, you adapt and improve it.”

“I’m not as wonderful as you’re making me sound... Hold on. Lord Julius?”

“Yes?”

“Aren’t you going to refuse?” I asked.

“Why should I? I am neither so free of avarice nor so obstinate that I could ignore a diamond before my eyes.”

“But if the recipe becomes commonly known, the product will have practically no value.”

“That’s not true,” he denied. “I know plenty of ways to play this.”

I couldn’t conceal my surprise at Lord Julius’s confident attitude. I was frozen solid, my mouth hanging half-open. The sight wasn’t my finest.

“Although,” he said, “this is assuming that I can count on your assistance.”

“Yes, of course!” I exclaimed. “I’ll help in any way I can!”

“I know I can count on you.” Lord Julius smiled.

Right back at you.

I’d thought that I’d either be putting him out or angering him, and I was disappointed in myself for not being able to imagine any other outcome. It felt shameful...doubting the person who’d opened his heart to me so much, who was so brilliant and generous.

“While we’re here, may I ask you something that’s been on my mind?” Julius inquired with a tilt of his head.

“What would that be?” I asked, tilting my own in return.

“Why did you teach me the recipe *before* naming your conditions?”

I froze.

“When you’re determined to get your opponent to agree to a condition,” he explained, “you should save your winning asset until the last moment. It would make sense if you were, say, asking a friend for a request, and you wished to demonstrate at the outset that you were acting in good faith... Except that you went to the trouble of clearing the room, so you were treating me as a businessman.”

“Yes, about that...” I’d hoped that he wouldn’t point that out. My eyes flitted uncontrollably around the room. *I don’t wanna tell him because my reason’s pathetic, but I doubt I can wriggle my way out of this.* Ashamed, I mumbled my explanation. “I didn’t have any other candidates to turn to if you refused my offer.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. So if you had...I would’ve let you do what you wanted with the recipe.”

“Sorry?” Julius asked, stunned.

I felt my cheeks heat up so much that I worried they’d caught fire. “This may sound odd after making you listen to my conditions, but I was certain that

everything would turn out fine with the product in your hands. You'd devise a guaranteed way of making the product popular that I could never dream of. So, even if you'd declined my offer, I hoped that we'd be able to act as though I'd simply made my friend a meal."

Bluntly put, I'd planned to have him shoulder all of the responsibility. I was positive that Lord Julius would do a good job if I'd just entrusted everything to him right from the start. I knew that, but even so, I hadn't wanted to abandon all thought and simply hand over the recipe.

There was a mountain of difference between entrusting the product to him and off-loading everything, including the responsibility, onto him. That was why I'd thought to add the stipulations. If Lord Julius had refused, it would've implied a fault in my conditions. Put another way, there would've been a flaw in my plan somewhere that my amateurish grasp of business wasn't enough to catch.

I'd intended to leave everything to him if that'd happened. In that case, I would've simply made my friend a meal, so no money or rights would've changed hands. Brazenly, I'd thought, *That way, there'll be no problems if Lord Julius reproduces the food and turns it into a product.*

Without much strength in my tone, I said, "Sorry for being underhanded..." But this provoked no response from Lord Julius. Finding that strange, I raised my head and our gazes met. His green eyes were round with surprise.

"You never cease to amaze me," he said.

Hmm? What does he mean by that?

As though he'd heard my thoughts, Lord Julius continued. "You're as righteous as any child your age, but you know when to back down. What's more, considering how much extensive knowledge you possess, it's no simple matter to remain humble and to understand your own shortcomings."

Is that a compliment or an insult? I can't quite tell. I'm full of youthful naivete, but at my core, I'm decrepit? Or, is the implication that my head's too big for my shoulders, but I've got myself sized up? Maybe it just sounds like that to me because I'm a pessimist...

Lord Julius returned to using more respectful language. “I am in awe of you once again. You truly are an amazing person, Your Highness.” He straightened his posture and looked me in the eyes. “I accept your conditions, and I will endeavor to meet your expectations.”

“You will?! Th-Thank you very much!”

I felt a wave of relief surge throughout my body upon hearing Lord Julius give his consent. He watched me with delight as I practically slumped with relief, but then he made a face like he’d hit upon an idea.

He raised two fingers, grinning like a mischievous child. “In line with our discussion, I have two requests of my own.”

The Trader's Elation

I stood outside the restaurant and watched Lady Mary leave.

Sir Orsein, the captain of the royal guard, carried Lady Mary away in his arms. She looked over his shoulder at me before they turned the corner. When I saw that, the corners of my lips arched upward into a smile. It was as if she had wanted to stay and talk some more. I loved her stunned reaction when I waved her goodbye.

I shouldn't act so familiar with the princess of my country, I thought. I was a bit surprised by my own actions, but Lady Mary didn't remonstrate with me; she just bashfully gave a little wave of her own hand in reply.

Oh, what an adorable sight. I used my right hand to obscure my complacent grin. The name Julius zu Eigel was well-known in this city, and I didn't want my mercantile reputation to be affected by the soppy look I had on my face at the present moment.

I fled back into the restaurant, finding a woman waiting for me with her arms crossed. Her ice-cold glare pierced me through.

"I didn't think you were capable of smiling so happily," Lady Bianca von Diebolt quipped through a sigh. "What a change from that shady smirk you have plastered on your face twenty-four seven." I realized how cheerful I'd looked, which made it impossible for me to argue against her insult.

I smiled wryly as I rubbed at my chin. "Do I look so strange?"

"Oh yeah. If you were capable of smiling like that at a woman your own age, you'd have found a wife long ago."

And you would've found a husband, I thought, but I kept that to myself. We didn't have a long history together, but I had learned how to avoid rousing her temper.

"It grieves me to hear you say that," I replied. "After all, you're the one who rejected our engagement."

“You’re hung up on that? We both knew at first glance that we weren’t a match.”

“No, you made the right choice.” I shrugged, and a smug smile appeared on Lady Bianca’s beautiful face.

My first encounter with Lady Bianca had taken place almost a year ago. I’d met with her at the behest of a meddling great-aunt of mine. Our introduction had been to test our suitability for each other, although both of us had more or less been tricked and were unaware of the plan.

As a second son, I had no claims to titles or inheritance, but I was over thirty now, and my bachelorhood had started to reflect poorly on my family. At seventeen, Lady Bianca was much younger than I, but most noblewomen ended up married in their midteens.

To put it bluntly, our meeting had been a ploy to rid our respective families of their leftovers.

However, the hopes of my engagement to Lady Bianca were dashed within minutes of our meeting, to the despair of our families. After everyone else had shuffled off and we were left alone together, she’d scanned me intently, looking me up and down, before declaring, “It’ll never happen.”

I’d been surprised by how calm I’d felt. If anything, I’d been struck by her audaciousness. She hadn’t held back, despite the difference in our families’ ranks —my father was a marquis, and hers was only a viscount.

I’d been intrigued. She was a different kind of woman from the ones I usually kept company with. However, I knew that I wouldn’t have wanted her as a lover or a wife. Though her beauty was one in a million, I couldn’t view her as a woman. She was more of a man than most men I knew.

I’d put an end to our prospective engagement with a quiet word to my great-aunt, so as to keep the matter private. Lady Bianca and I had parted amicably, without leaving a bad taste in our mouths, but against all odds, the new friendship between my nephew and her younger brother had brought us back together.

“I think it was the right call too,” she continued. “I wouldn’t want to be caught

dead with a fiancé who bends over backward for such a tiny little girl.”

I raised both hands slightly in a gesture of surrender. “Now, now... To stand up for myself, I don’t have any improper feelings toward her.”

Lady Bianca immediately reacted with a glare and an indignant retort. “Well, duh. I would never let you leer at that little angel.”

“She seems to have caught your fancy,” I remarked.

“Oh, yes! Meeting that cutie-pie was the best thing that’s ever happened to me. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt glad to know you.”

Doe-eyed bliss and a blush replaced Lady Bianca’s angry scowl. I knew that this teenaged friend of mine had a soft spot for girls—and younger girls in particular—but I’d never seen her so excited.

“Says the woman who was trying to use my connections to get on board a ship.”

“But that’s just fair. You and your nephew whispered in my brother’s ear and got him to leave the country, so it’s the least you could do.”

Her fierce look made me regret my naivete; I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Lady Bianca didn’t care about men, but the sole exception was her little brother. She doted on him and cherished him like he was the most precious thing in the world. Although they were born only a year apart, their relationship was more akin to mother and son.

However, her brother had a tendency to make bold decisions despite his generally timid disposition and despite the wishes of his overprotective sister: he’d first ignored his sister’s objections and had begun priestly training, then he’d become an apprentice sorcerer, and now he’d left for a foreign country.

“What do you hope to achieve by chasing after him?” I asked. “He’s begun to live his own life.”

Lady Bianca fell silent, looking sour, and her face made it clear that she recognized and acknowledged my point. I knew that she didn’t *actually* think that I’d tempted her brother into leaving. She was simply at a loss; the brother whom she’d always led around by the hand had suddenly become independent.

“I wanna find out what changed him,” she stated.

What changed the once-reclusive Michael?

How would Lady Bianca react if she knew that the greatest cause of his change was the girl she’d been entranced by a moment ago?

“You’re not planning to bring him back, are you?” I asked.

“I’ll decide once I talk to him.”

“Once a person’s changed, it’s no easy task to change them back.”

I smiled while picturing her brother. His face had still looked as soft as before, but in his eyes had burned a passion that marked him as a man who’d made up his mind. He wouldn’t bend easily, not even for his beloved sister.

Lady Bianca grimaced with disgust after seeing my smile—or my “shady smirk,” as she would have it. “Is that experience talking?” she asked.

“Sorry?” I thought that she was asking whether I’d ever failed to change someone else, but I’d apparently misunderstood her.

“Is your sincerity stemming from the fact that you’ve been changed as well?” she clarified. She was truly asking, *Does Lord Julius know what he’s talking about because someone has changed him before?*

I guess I’ve never considered that.

I called upon memories of my younger self, back when I’d been a boy from a wealthy household who’d lived a life devoid of want. Without the pressure that came from being an heir like my brother, or the weight of parental expectations, I had done whatever I’d fancied. I had been carefree.

Probably as a result of that, I’d never been easily impressionable. If I were to put it nicely, I could say that I’d been strong-willed—but truthfully, it was just stubbornness and the need to have everything my way. “Self-centered” would’ve been the best word to describe me. I’d often been praised for my soft-spoken manner and approachability, but all of that had just been a facade. On the inside, I’d been—in no uncertain terms—the complete opposite of that... More like faulty merchandise, the sort that never finds a buyer.

My approach to business had been no different. I’d possessed a bad habit of

only going after the products that had caught my personal interest. I'd listen to people's advice just to hear it, but I would always make the final decision based solely on my own instincts. My selfishness had known no bounds, and it was truly a wonder that I'd managed to survive so long.

Although, I'm not all that different now.

At that point in my thoughts, something seemed odd. I stopped moving and mumbled to myself. "Wait..."

I tended to chase after the things that interested me. That description of me wasn't exactly wrong, but it wasn't entirely correct either. *But lately, I've been buying books on cooking and medicine left and right. Those fields don't interest me. And each time I come across a new seasoning, whose face do I picture?*

I'd also thought that disregarding the opinions of others when making a final decision was one of my traits, but that didn't seem quite right either. I'd stipulated two conditions with regard to Lady Mary's request, but the plan at large had been hers. I could've effortlessly put on a performance and maneuvered her into recrafting the plan to fit with my views.

But I hadn't.

"My word," I croaked, astounded. *I'm not impressionable? Yeah, right. Everything I do recently has been shaped by Lady Mary.* With a new understanding of that part of myself, I erupted into laughter. "Ah ha ha!"

"Hey?! What's gotten into you?" Lady Bianca recoiled at my sudden outburst. "Have you finally lost your mind?"

Anyone would've doubted the sanity of a man who went from silence to fits of laughter in an instant. However, I didn't bother to cover for my odd behavior.

Now that I thought about it, Lady Mary had never stopped surprising me since the day we'd first met. She had a wealth of knowledge and cunning ideas beyond her years. But at the same time, she was childishly sweet. She was easy to get along with and never acted haughty, but I'd occasionally get a glimpse of her prowess as a princess.

There's never a dull moment with her, I thought. I was more excited than my age should allow, and I felt the winds of change beginning to blow in my once-

boring life.

“She’s something special... ‘Goddess’ really is the right word,” I whispered, exhilaration causing my voice to tremble.

Goddess. I’d wanted to use that word on the product for the sole purpose of boosting sales. However, it now began to take on an additional meaning in my mind.

The Reincarnated Princess Goes for a Stroll

After parting with Lord Julius, Sir Leonhart and I returned the way we'd come.

The streets had already been busy that morning, but the lunchtime rush now further swelled the crowds. Moving through the dense crowd seemed like no easy feat, but Sir Leonhart didn't bump into anyone as he smoothly advanced. He was carrying me in his arms, as he had on the way in. I was fed up with staring at the tops of the other pedestrians' heads, so I began to examine the goods displayed in the storefronts.

Tao lived up to its reputation as the gateway to the sea; I saw plenty of unusual wares. Vendors were selling fruit by weight, some of which I'd never seen before.

I wonder what that yellow, spiky one is. The round, solid one by its side is a mystery too—it's green, bumpy, and the size of a silk temari ball. Is it even a fruit? Looks more like a dragon egg.

A slender woman picked up the dragon egg—really, what was it?—that I'd been gawking at. "My husband loves these," I could hear her saying.

Oh, so it is edible.

"Lady Mary," Sir Leonhart called, pulling my attention back from the shop stalls.

"Yes?"

I wasn't sure why, but he seemed to be trying not to smile.

"Shall we have a look around?" he suggested.

"Oh, can we?!" I was hooked. I knew that I seemed childish, but I couldn't hold myself back. *If I pass up the opportunity to explore the town with him, I don't know when I'll get another chance. I rarely travel in anything except a carriage, and that's only when I can actually get out of the palace.*

The offer was irresistible to a shut-in like me. I threw my head back in

preparation for a big nod, but a voice of reason from the recesses of my mind advised restraint.

Veering from our arranged plan will give Sir Leonhart more work to do. I can't have that. Strolling through the town does sound appealing. Especially the "with Sir Leonhart" part, which is irresistibly enticing. But I don't want it so badly that I'd make my beloved knight's job harder. Plus, we shouldn't keep the poor carriage driver waiting all day.

I shook my head and smiled with resignation. "We'd best not."

Sir Leonhart looked a little surprised. "Why is that?" He pointed those scrutinizing jet-black eyes at me.

I floundered, not expecting that I'd need to explain myself. "Well... Because we should return to the palace, shouldn't we?" I mumbled, exactly like a child making excuses. I had nothing to feel guilty about, but somehow, it was like I was being scolded.

"So your reasoning is that 'we *should* go home,' and not 'I *want* to go home'?" he asked.

Well no, I don't actually want to go home. Really, I wanted to have fun here. I wanted to spend more time with Sir Leonhart, but I didn't want to waste his time with my selfish desires.

"Lady Mary."

"Yes?"

"I want you to answer me honestly. Forget the unimportant factors like whether the driver will have to wait or whether you're inconveniencing me."

Sir Leonhart stopped walking at the end of the street. Hearing his words, I realized that he'd seen through my entire thought process. I flinched slightly when he looked straight into my eyes.

Sir Leonhart enunciated each word with care. "Do you want to have some fun with me?"

A strange yelp escaped my throat. For a moment, I failed to process the meaning of his words. Sir Leonhart grinned cheerfully as he saw the

flabbergasted look on my face, and his expression was like a child who'd pulled off a prank.

A fiery blush enveloped my cheeks.

Ooh, that's sly! Talk about a lethal choice of words! Scandalous! I'm gonna savor this!!!

My posture became hunched and I covered my bright-red cheeks with my hands.

"I...do." My voice was so quiet that the roar of the crowds almost drowned it out, but Sir Leonhart heard it.

"So do I," he said, tousling my hair.

Nervously, I glanced at him. I caught an up-close glimpse of his dazzlingly friendly smile and had to rush to cover my nose. *Don't fail me, nose membrane! I don't wanna be the girl who gets a nosebleed in this situation.*

"Those shops over there appear to be popular with women." Sir Leonhart pointed at the other end of the street and then made his way over.

Young women were crowded around the storefront. I saw threads, fabrics, lace, and ribbons up for sale. The lineup was sure to speak to any girl's heart, and my eyes lit up. Sir Leonhart smiled wryly when I instinctively craned my head toward them for a better look. He leaned down and placed me on the ground as delicately as he'd handle a glass vase.

Back on my own two feet, I gleefully inspected one item after another. My heart raced at the sight of the colorful fabrics—chartreuse, mustard, cyan, and baby pink. *If I use this shade for embroidery, what color thread should I pair it with? What design would look best?* Embroidery wasn't my forte, but I was enjoying imagining the possibilities.

Next, I ran my eyes across the collections of lace. *The coarser crocheted lace wouldn't work for a dress, but it would make a fabulous headband. These ribbons on the next display are great too. I think I like the blue ones best, but the red one would look perfect on Nero!*

As I imagined my lovely cat, I broke into a smile. I picked up the ribbons,

turned around to Sir Leonhart behind me, and almost called out to him—but instead, I froze on the spot. Not because I couldn't find him; that was easy. After all, every nearby woman had her eyes pinned to him.

There was a pair of girls in their midteens whose faces looked similar, so they might've been sisters. They were staring at Sir Leonhart from the side, and both girls had blushing cheeks. A beautiful, glamorous woman was also gazing passionately at him, and a female shop assistant was so entranced that she'd stopped working. There were plenty of other women staring at him as well, young and old, single and taken.

My heart stopped. I'd known that he was popular. And I'd thought that I understood what that meant.

Sir Leonhart noticed that I'd stopped moving. "What's the matter?" he asked, tilting his head.

That slight gesture pierced the hearts of the nearby women, and they all sighed blissfully. I was torn: on the one hand, I wanted to embrace our mutual admiration of Sir Leonhart, but on the other hand, darker feelings were sprouting within my heart. The maelstrom of negativity I felt left me biting my lip.

I replaced the ribbons I'd picked up and took Sir Leonhart's hand. He looked surprised as I led him away, but despite his confusion, he followed without resisting.

As soon as we'd broken free of the crowd, Sir Leonhart called my name. "Lady Mary?"

He gently tugged on my hand and I stopped, but all I could do was stare at my feet. I didn't have the courage to turn around and face him.

I should be ashamed of myself. I'm so embarrassed! We're not even in a relationship, but I'm getting jealous and dragging him along with me.

I couldn't have stopped myself though. I'd been so worried that one of the women would take him for herself, and now, I was disappointed in myself for overreacting to a few admiring gazes.

He called my name again. "Lady Mary."

My fingers gripped his hand even more firmly. The next moment, I felt my feet leave the ground. Sir Leonhart had lifted me into his arms again and was looking down at me with concern.

“Did something unpleasant happen?”

When I heard the gentle tone of his voice, a surge of guilt struck me. I could’ve cried, I felt so pathetic. Though I didn’t want to reveal why I’d fled from the store, pretending that everything was fine probably wouldn’t work. *And I need to pay the price for worrying him with my behavior.*

An embarrassed blush rose to my cheeks. “Sir Leon, you’re too popular...”

Sir Leonhart froze, aside from his long eyelashes, which fluttered up and down as he blinked several times, likely attempting to digest what my words had meant.

“Am I?” he asked, as though he had no idea.

“Yes, you are!” I snapped back immediately. “Didn’t you notice?” *I mean, everyone’s eyes were on you!*

My tone had come out as accusatory, but it didn’t seem to upset him. Sir Leonhart shook his head, looking perplexed. “I thought that I was paying enough attention to our surroundings, but...I must be a terrible guard because it seems that I was too distracted by watching you,” he said nonchalantly.

My breath caught in my throat.

Too distracted by me? Hold on, Rose. Don’t get ahead of yourself. He clearly means that he was watching me as a guard, and not a single thing more than that. He was just keeping an eye on me because if I left his sight we could’ve been separated. That’s all.

I desperately tried to convince myself, but the next bombshell statement from Sir Leonhart mocked my efforts. “Those ribbons you had... I think the blue one suits you best.”

I’m starting to feel like this man’s enjoying watching me squirm, I thought with a mixture of excitement and a sense of defeat.

The Reincarnated Princess Has an Interview

I arrived in my father's bedroom late at night.

He took one look at me and muttered, "About time." His expression and the irritation lacing his voice almost caused me to grimace.

What's that supposed to mean? These words were on the tip of my tongue, but I forced them back. He gestured with his eyes toward the sofa opposite himself and I took a seat. I told myself that I'd be inviting ridicule if I were to bite back, but this self-restraint would prove to be pointless.

"For someone who declared to me that she'd take action for herself, you do appear to be moving at quite the leisurely pace."

My brows furrowed when I heard his up-front insult. His words struck a nerve in me because I'd had similar thoughts myself. *I know better than anyone! I'm already far behind the schedule I had in mind!!!*

"A lot has happened..." I said.

"It would appear so." The room was silent except for the sound of my father turning the pages of his documents. He continued speaking without raising his head from his work. "There have been some interesting developments while you were sauntering around the port city."

To move the conversation along, I put on a strained smile and said, "Is that so?" I'd expected that he'd know what I'd been up to, but it appeared that he was more clued in than I'd thought.

"The whole ruckus about ghosts and whatnot that originated in Grundt... I'd predicted that it would take root in other countries and envelop the whole continent. And yet, I'm told that a countermeasure has been found."

I was unable to come up with a reply that feigned ignorance. In fact, I couldn't even move. As I stood there, my father's fingers flicked over another rustling page.

He explained in minute detail about the ghosts actually being a disease, the cause of that disease being nutritional deficiency, and the proposal of a solution—a food preparation method to extend the viability of vegetables on long sea voyages.

“Very intriguing, isn’t it? This culinary technique enables vegetables to be stored for long periods of time.”

I said nothing.

My father continued, paying no attention to my pursed-lipped silence. “The question of what foods to take on a long voyage is an important one. Marketing this preparation as a magical remedy would’ve invited skepticism, but calling it a ‘long-lasting’ food wouldn’t. In other words, sales wouldn’t be harmed even if there were no truth to the slogan claiming that this food fights diseases. This is especially true because the product’s price is so low. I’d love to know whose idea it was.”

My smile was bright. “I couldn’t possibly imagine.” I’d had to strain the words out, and my voice had sounded stiffer than I’d hoped.

“Julius zu Eigel is the one marketing it,” my father said. “He’s the uncle of your former potential fiancé. I believe that the two of you are acquainted.”

“Yes. He’s a wonderful person.”

“In what way?”

“He’s honest, compassionate, and accomplished.”

“Compassionate indeed,” my father responded with no emotion in his voice. “They say that he attaches the recipe to each and every one of the products. Truly selfless.”

I found myself at a loss for words. The thought that I was to blame for this mockery against Lord Julius inspired within me more guilt than anger. I clenched my fists tightly and my fingernails dug into my skin.

“Apparently, it’s selling well,” I said.

“It tastes good, and that matters most. I hear that the attached recipe is for a basic version, and the actual product tastes different.”

What my father had just commented on was the first of Lord Julius's requests—or, conditions, really. The paper slip attached to the product detailed only a basic recipe, and the product itself was a variation on that. The idea was to demonstrate how the right herbs and seasonings could enhance the product. Apparently, this had also generated a boom in the market for herbs, along with some unconventional seasonings.

As for the second request...

"What's more, it carries a goddess's blessing," my father said. "Seafarers are a pious breed, so they'll purchase it to secure that blessing for themselves."

"A goddess, you say?"

"Julius zu Eigel's inspiration for the food was divine, it seems. His story suggests that the idea was bestowed upon him by the goddess who saved his sister-in-law from her deathbed. He named the product 'Dew of the Sea,' which happens to be another name for a certain herb—the symbol of chastity and undying love, otherwise known as...rosemary. All of this is true, is it not?"

He flung his documents away and they sprawled across the table with a rustling noise. I bit my lips as I witnessed that, unable to think of anything to say.

But my father demanded the truth. "Why did you not take the credit?"

"You appear to be well-informed, so there was no need to tell you."

"You're arguing in hindsight."

I had no response for that.

"Do not convince yourself that humility is a virtue," my father warned. "It's no such thing. Do you honestly believe that you can afford to be humble in your present circumstances?" His voice radiated a sneer.

I still had no argument. I'd be carted off as a bride to a neighboring country if I couldn't leave behind an accomplishment within the specified time period; I had an arranged marriage to nullify, and that demanded a sense of urgency. I knew all of this very well.

So why hadn't I taken credit for the sauerkraut? I wasn't being humble and

protesting that the credit should be shared, nor was I so conceited that I'd expect my father to figure out everything on his own.

No, my reasoning had been more simple than that: I was scared.

The knowledge I'd utilized had come from my past life. If awareness of scurvy in this world had been higher, then a panic wouldn't have ensued in the first place. Therefore, it was unlikely that a treatment would be well-known by anyone here. I'd told Julius that I'd learned about the illness from a book, but I was certain that no such book existed. People could search the palace libraries, or anywhere else in the world, and still come out empty-handed. My father was not the sort of person to miss the fallacy I'd concocted.

My head sank.

"Act with more confidence," my father called out suddenly, stunning me.

"Huh?" He might as well have read my mind, and I couldn't conceal my surprise.

"If you plan to smile your way through, then persist until the very end," he instructed. "Averting your eyes is tantamount to confessing that you're hiding something."

I felt like I'd taken a verbal beating. My father was right; I *was* keeping a guilty secret. I was afraid of being discovered cheating, and I felt as if I were writing down answers without even knowing the formulas. I froze, my eyes wide open.

After a single glance at me, he exhaled a brief sigh and said, "You're showing it on your face again. The art of negotiation truly isn't one of your strengths." He slovenly crossed his long legs and rested his chin on his hand.

If, at that point, he'd told me, "Even your little brother has more potential than you do," I would've been too exhausted to even attempt a rebuttal.

"Negotiations aren't about relinquishing to the other person every shred of information they want," he explained. "When you wish to withhold a fact, smile and remain silent. Allow them to interpret the meaning of your silence for themselves."

You're asking for the moon... My poker face isn't anywhere near that good.

Strangely though, I didn't feel resentful. It was an undisputed fact that I sucked at negotiating, and employing my father's tactic would indeed benefit me.

Hold on... The way this conversation is going, is it okay to assume that I won't have to reveal my source of information?

My apprehension drained away and my body relaxed.

"So?" my father said, as though he'd been waiting for this exact moment.

"So...?"

"Where did you come into the possession of knowledge that the doctors, chefs, and even scholars of the palace were unaware of?"

His deadpan expression seemed slightly amused to me. Watching my father's face, I said nothing and put on my best smile.

He watched my smile for a few seconds before declaring, "So be it." His tone then became irritated. "You wouldn't be here if you didn't want something from me. Hurry up and say it."

My smile almost proved short-lived. It would've been nice to put him in his place and say, "This is your own fault," but I decided against that option. It looked like I'd be able to refrain from discussing my knowledge of scurvy, so I wanted to keep the stick and the hornet's nest separated by a good distance.

Let's just wrap this conversation up and close the door behind me.

"My final preparations are complete," I said, "so I'd like to leave the kingdom. Will you grant me permission?"

My father seemed unsurprised by the blunt and succinct declaration of my wish. "Where do you plan to go?" he asked matter-of-factly, without raising an eyebrow. This was probably nothing more than verification; my destination would be very old news to him.

In that case, my only option was to be up-front. "To Flanmer."

"You intend to follow the Eigels' heir?"

"Yes."

Several letters from George had arrived in the little under a month since he'd left. Their expedition had taken the land route, and they'd been inside Flanner for some time now. At this very moment, they were probably hunting for clues about the medicine, and instead of leaving everything to them, I needed to play a part of my own.

I glared at my father, my resolve renewed, but he put up no objection, as though to mock my efforts. "Go ahead."

I froze. He'd sure taken the wind out of my sails.

"Don't be so surprised," he said. "You are, after all, the one who requested the right to unrestricted travel."

"That's...true, but..."

He was correct. I had done that. However, I'd expected his approval to be more challenging to obtain. Unconvinced, I eyed him suspiciously. *Am I being too mistrustful in suspecting that he has something up his sleeve?*

"You've already procured a ship by yourself. I have no reason to stop you." My father paused, as though to toy with me as I watched on with bated breath. "However..."

Yep, here it comes! Let's see what Herculean task he has for me.

My father observed me bracing myself, and then he spoke. "You will leave Leonhart behind."

My eyes opened wide. "What?" My voice was barely audible, too feeble for me to recognize as my own. There had been one surprise after another so far, but this outdid them all.

What did my father just tell me?

"I'm willing to overlook excursions into our own territory, but I cannot permit you to remove him from Nevel. He commands the royal guard. He is not your babysitter."

I gasped.

"If you want protection," my father continued, "then take your own personal guard."

He had a point. In fact, he was so justified that no counterargument sprang to mind. If I'd thought about it for a second, I'd have realized: taking Sir Leonhart away from his post as the royal guard captain, all the way to a foreign country on my personal business, would never be permitted. But the thought hadn't even occurred to me. *How could I have been so stupid?*

Seeing me immobilized and with my mouth hanging open, my father sighed again. I wasn't sure how many times I'd heard that today.

"You hadn't considered this?"

"No," I confessed after a pause.

"I assumed as much when his presence didn't appear as part of your request. You're too accustomed to receiving special treatment."

"Yes," I said after another long pause. Crumples appeared in my dress as I clutched at the fabric.

My father hadn't specified which person I'd received too much special treatment from, but I knew anyway—I'd been expecting too much from Sir Leonhart.

I'd grown used to the comfort of keeping him by my side and asking his advice. I should've never let it slip my mind that he had a position of responsibility that came with a huge workload. However, in my cowardice, I'd turned a blind eye when the facts didn't suit me. *I'm pathetic and awful*, I thought. And even now, after this had become clear to me, I was still hesitating to accept my father's order. I was beyond helping.

"You know that he is both profoundly talented and famous as well?" my father asked me.

I raised my head and stuttered out my agreement. "I, uh... Yes."

Even ignoring his position as captain of the royal guard, Sir Leonhart's name was still well-known. Tales of the Black Lion had even spread abroad, inspiring many young knights.

"Consider the impression that you would leave on people if you traveled with him."

“My impression?” I repeated.

“Yes. If you were to accomplish something, do you think that they’d lavish *you* with praise?”

Obedying my father, I pressed my fingers against my lips and thought in silence. *Let’s imagine that I ask Sir Leonhart to accompany me and everything goes according to plan. I secure the medicine and successfully prevent a pandemic in Vint. Would the people around me cheer my accomplishments?*

“I don’t think they would,” I concluded.

The answer had to be no; everybody would assume that Sir Leonhart was responsible. I was sure that some people would even suspect that I was a conniving princess, one who’d used him and had then stolen the credit in order to bolster my reputation.

Under normal circumstances, that wouldn’t bother me. I wasn’t interested in attaining fame. Having my name dragged through the mud as a credit stealer was preferable to stumbling out beneath the spotlight. My only desire was to live a peaceful life. Well, that, and to become Sir Leonhart’s bride. With those two things in hand, I’d have no complaints.

However, circumstances had changed. I wanted to accomplish something, and I had to do so in such a way that my success was clear to everyone. I needed something big under my belt to avoid a marriage in a foreign country.

“To begin with, you must make your name ring out,” my father said. “Forge yourself such a pristine reputation that you can stand on even footing with Sir Leonhart.”

Stand on even footing with the kingdom’s best swordsman, an excellent commander who’s famed internationally for his prowess as a soldier? What was my difficulty setting again?

Not doable. That’s insane. I could restart my life ten times over and it’d still be practically impossible. I don’t know what this man is expecting from a little girl who’s not even a teenager yet.

In spite of my thoughts though, a smile began to form on my lips. I’d go down any road, no matter how treacherous, if it meant that I could find a place by Sir

Leonhart's side. Sure, I was playing into my father's hands, but backing down wasn't an option.

So, I grinned and said, "I'll do my utmost."

My father silently nodded.

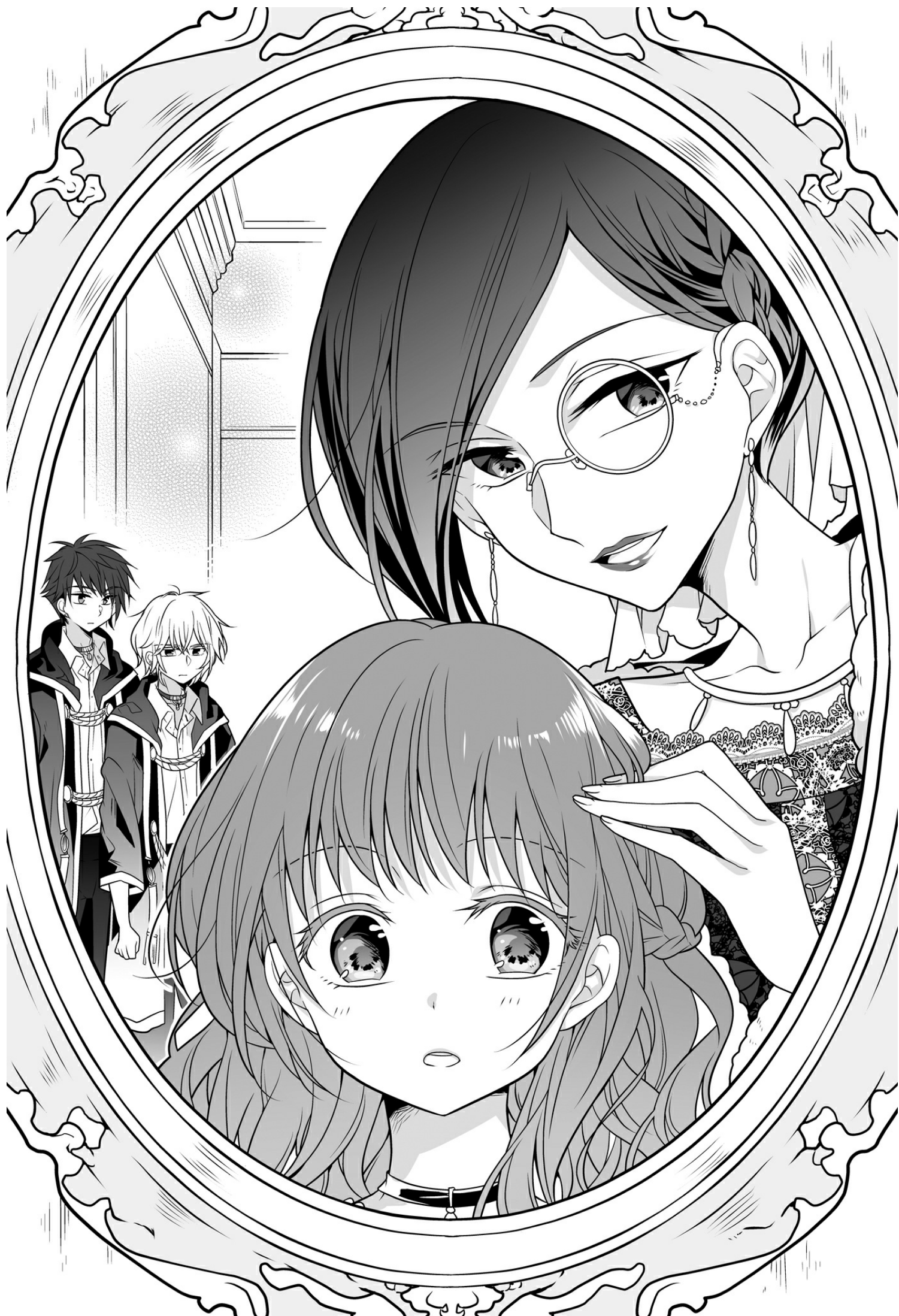
The Reincarnated Princess Prepares

“Will this shade be all right?”

Slender fingers ran through my hair. I looked up, and through the pristinely polished mirror, my eyes met those of the beautiful lady. She was standing behind me, and she wore a silver-framed monocle over her right eye—it was Miss Irene.

“I’ve colored it slightly darker than Sir Behlmer’s,” she continued while looking at my reflection in the mirror, “but your hair is soft, so it should look like the same color beneath the sun.”

Peering into the mirror, I saw that my hair was now a dark brown, dyed just a modicum darker than Klaus’s. For a moment, the reflection of my own familiar face seemed like a stranger’s. I nodded while marveling at the drastic difference a little hair dye could make to one’s appearance.



“Thank you very much, Miss Irene.”

“The pleasure’s mine. Thank you for participating in my experiment.” Miss Irene removed the cloth she’d used as a makeshift hairdressing gown from my shoulders, folded it up, and then smiled.

She had invented the dye herself to turn my hair dark brown, hence her use of the word “experiment.” Of course, henna, indigo, and other dyes existed in this world, but with some drawbacks that kept amateurs like me far away: namely, they took five hours to set, and they were permanent. *And they smell horrible too.*

In contrast, Miss Irene’s invention could dye hair in half an hour, and the color could be removed with water as well.

“Make sure the water’s warm when you want to remove the dye,” she advised, “or else the color won’t rinse out.”

“That’ll help. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if a splash from the waves washed out the color,” I said as Miss Irene handed me a bottle of the dye.

She forced out a smile. “I’m more worried about the waves washing you overboard than their effect on your hair. Be a good girl and stay inside your room, away from the water.”

“I’ll...keep that in mind.”

I couldn’t admit that I had intentions to explore every bit of the ship. The expression on my face probably gave me away though. Miss Irene looked at me, and her smile seemed even more forced than before.

When I stood up from the seat in front of the mirror and looked over my shoulder, Lutz and Teo spoke up. Until now, they’d been waiting quietly.

“Hey, what’s this all about?” asked Lutz.

“Huh?”

“Are you really traveling abroad?” asked Teo.

They’d practically broken through the door and into the room about ten minutes before. However, a single cool glare from their teacher, Miss Irene, had

shut them up before they'd even had a chance to barrage me with questions. Miss Irene had them well trained, as evidenced by the way they'd sat quietly in the corner of the room until we'd finished.

"I am," I confirmed.

"Where? Why? Who with?" came Lutz's rapid-fire volley of questions.

I swiveled to face them and looked into their eyes. Both Lutz and Teo wore severe expressions.

"I have business to attend to in Flanmer, and I'm going with Klaus."

"In Flanmer?! Is that some sort of joke?!" Lutz shouted, aghast. A sense of urgency shone in his indigo-blue eyes, which were opened as wide as saucers. Lutz rushed over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders. His menacing look overawed me, and I instinctively lurched backward. "Do you know how far away Flanmer is?!" he exclaimed. "It's not like going to the next town over!"

Lutz, you sound like a mother telling her kid off... He's right though. It is a ridiculous distance to travel for a shut-in like me who barely ever leaves the palace.

"And you'll be alone with a man! Are you out of your mind?!"

My eardrums were on the verge of bursting with him continuously shouting so close to me. "I don't know what you're worried about," I said, confused. "It's just Klaus."

"I'd like to know what's so reassuring about that—you're to be accompanied by a crazed dog who's so devoted to you that he'd chew up and spit out anyone who gets near," came Lutz's impassioned counterargument.

I can't believe that's what he thinks of Klaus... No wait, yes I can.

Teo tapped Lutz's hands a few times and removed them from my shoulders. "Calm down, Lutz. Sir Behlmer wouldn't harm the princess. He can be trusted on that count alone."

Teo's acting like he's sticking up for Klaus, but it sounds more like scathing criticism. "On that count alone"? So you're saying that he can't be trusted for anything else?

“What I’m more interested in, Princess, is why you’re only taking a single guard,” Teo said.

“It...has to be that way.”

Teo gave me a pointed look. “So that you don’t stick out?” His expression and the tone of his voice were both firm, a clear departure from his usual cheerful demeanor. “You’re going as far as to dye your hair, so this can’t be an official mission. At the same time, Flanmer isn’t close enough for a quick, secret day out. Just what trouble are you getting yourself into?”

Nothing gets past you, Teo.

My shoulders twitched a little. His red eyes grew even more serious when he saw my slightly panicked reaction.

“Look, Princess—”

A graceful hand darted into the space between Teo and me. “Enough, my foolish students!” Miss Irene had been patiently watching our exchange, but now she stood in front of me as if to guard me from the boys. “You’re not children, so stop asking every question that pops into your heads. Speak only *after* you’ve given your queries due consideration.”

She looked at them with disappointment in her eyes and heaved a sigh. “The princess may call you her friends, but that doesn’t give you license to treat her however you like. Her position entails certain responsibilities and duties. Discard the impudent notion that she can let you in on everything.”

Teo opened his mouth to argue, but then he closed it again. He bit down on his lips, appearing frustrated.

Lutz sulkily looked away.

I hadn’t wanted to upset them, but to be honest, I was grateful to Miss Irene for her intervention; I couldn’t possibly fill them in on every little detail of my plan, and I didn’t want to lie to them either.

“Sorry, you two,” I said.

“Princess...”

“I’ll be all right, and I’ll try not to put myself in danger, so don’t worry about

me.”

“You’re not a good judge of when you’ll be ‘all right,’” Teo said in response to my vague assurances, looking bitter.

I just smiled awkwardly since I couldn’t dispute that. After all, he was right.

Lutz stared at his feet, his brows furrowed. “I wish we could go with you.” He’d grown up a lot over the last few years and his face was more mature than it used to be, but his expression looked like a sulking child’s right now.

I stood on my tiptoes and stroked Lutz’s hair. “You’re apprentice sorcerers, so you can’t just leave the palace. I’ll come home safe and sound, so please, be here for me when I get back.” The strands of his hair were as fine as silk, and they felt lovely and smooth in my hands.

Lutz’s eyes widened like he’d been caught off guard, but then he began to fidget uncomfortably. “Don’t treat me like a kid,” he muttered irritably while pouting. His ears were burning with embarrassment. However, he didn’t push my hands away.

Ah, this is what it’s like to have a little brother, I thought jokingly. I kept that to myself though because I knew it’d annoy him.

“Princess...” Teo called.

I took my hands away from Lutz’s head and turned to Teo. His face was a jumbled mess of emotions, each vying for supremacy in his eyes, and his gaze seemed to be pleading with me. But he was pursing his lips tightly and restraining himself from putting his feelings into words. “I cannot say what I want to, I mustn’t”—that’s what the look on his face told me.

“Teo?” I called, trying to urge him to speak his mind.

But after a sharp flinch of his shoulders, he disguised his sullen frown with a smile. “I’ll give you an amulet later, to keep you safe. Could you take it with you?”

The words that came out of his mouth were obviously not the words he’d been holding back; he had swallowed those, and they had vanished forever. I was annoyed that I was both aware of that fact and powerless to do anything

about it.

“Ah! Me too! You’ll get one from me!” Lutz barged past Teo and reentered my vision. The awkward atmosphere that was hanging in the air dissipated. “If you won’t take us, then take them instead.”

I was practically intimidated into nodding my assent, after which both of them sighed with relief.

Oh, I’ve got them so worried about me, I thought once more.

They both knew how big and scary the world really was, so to them, my actions probably seemed quite careless. I was a princess with no idea how the world worked, embarking all of a sudden on a journey abroad. To them, that’d be as reckless as—no, *more* reckless than—sending a three-year-old child out on their first errand.

Teo had probably wanted to ask me not to go.

He was worried about me. But regardless, in the end, he’d done me the favor of leaving it unsaid. He’d respected the decision I’d made.

I expressed my heartfelt gratitude. “Thank you.”

Both of them began to look cheerful.

“The amulets are gonna be great,” Lutz said, holding his head high. “We’ll make sure of that.”

My thanks had been for more than just the amulets, but I didn’t correct him.

Still though, I didn’t realize that amulets were a thing in this world too. The rectangular omamori design popular in Japan entered my mind, but theirs would probably be different. The Japanese version didn’t mesh with the European Renaissance aesthetic of this world. *Maybe it’ll be more like a talisman? Or some other Western amulet?*

“I can’t wait to see them,” I said, and they both smiled and nodded.

Teo changed the subject. “By the way, Princess, do you know where your traveling companion is?” He asked this as though the thought had only just entered his mind.

“Oh yeah,” Lutz said in response, glancing back at the door. “Now that you mention it, the guard posted outside is someone different.”

As they’d said, another knight from the royal guard was accompanying me today instead of Klaus.

“I suspect that he’s getting ahead of the tasks that he’ll miss while we’re gone. Recently, he hasn’t stopped working.”

My eyes glazed over as I recalled the day I’d told Klaus about our trip.

“I’m going on a journey and I want you to come with me.”

I’d told him this out of the blue, and he’d accepted without a moment’s hesitation. I knew that desk work would pile up in his absence, and he’d need to prepare the people who’d be covering that work for him. But despite how thoroughly inconvenient my request had been, he’d beamed from ear to ear.

It was creepy how pleased he’d been. Honestly, it had frightened me a little. I didn’t like the thought of a journey alone with Klaus when he was *that* excited.

While picturing the face of my ecstatic personal guard, I prayed, *Somebody please bring his mood back down to normal levels.*

The Personal Guard Trains

“Oh!” cried a girl as a rattan basket fell from her hands. Pure-white sheets scattered across the hall floor.

“F-Forgive me.”

Perhaps she was intimidated by me, or perhaps she was just nervous, but the young maid’s apology was sheepish and quiet, and she had a tense look on her face. She was trying to refold the sprawled-out sheets in a hurry, but they slipped through her trembling hands once again.

The basket had rolled over to my feet, so I picked it up and placed it by her side. When she raised her head to look at me, I offered her my hand, and her hazel eyes opened wide.

“I... Um.”

“You don’t want to be down on the ground, it’s dirty,” I said.

She seemed hesitant about taking my hand, so I took hers instead, a little forcefully, and pulled her to her feet. The maid became perfectly still and appeared to be holding her breath. I let go of her hand and gathered up the laundry. After a light pat to remove the dirt, I placed the sheets back into the basket.

“Here you are,” I said, handing the basket back to the maid.

She took it, seeming stunned. “Th-Th-Thank you!” She looked up at me with the startled eyes of a small animal, and I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Take care not to trip again.”

After a gasp, she gathered her breath and said, “P-Please excuse me.” Her face turned red so quickly that I could almost hear the change happen. The maid flung her head down in a bow and turned to leave.

I scratched my cheek as I watched her depart. She took off with a hastiness unbecoming of a well-raised girl. *What’s the matter with her?* I thought. *Do I*

look like a monster or something?

A voice called out from behind me while I stood there looking dejected. “Hey there, charmer.”

I turned to follow the voice and found Dennis—a colleague who’d entered the royal guard at the same time as I had.

“You shouldn’t be leading on these inexperienced girls when you’re not even interested,” Dennis said. “It’s not fair to them.”

“If you say things like that, you’ll give people the wrong impression of me. All I did was pick up some laundry.”

“That’s *all* you did?” he teased. “By itself, that’s out of character for you in my eyes.”

I frowned but didn’t argue. Most days, I would’ve spared no more than a single look at the maid before moving on. So why had I acted differently?

The reason was simple—

“What’s gotten you in such a good mood?”

—as Dennis said, I was in an amazing mood.

To be more accurate, I was blissful.

“Nothing in particular.”

“Tell the truth,” he prodded. “You have the young maids swooning because you’re all smiles instead of your usual cold self. And you know our supervisor, the one that has it in for you? He was shaking in his boots, going on about how you’ve finally gone crazy.”

That was far from a compliment, but I couldn’t argue because I knew he was right.

I was no stranger to having supervisors gripe at me when they passed by, but my recent responses to them hadn’t done me any favors. Nobody could blame a supervisor for questioning the sanity of a man who, instead of maintaining silence and a cold glare like he usually would, smiled from ear to ear and said, “I’ll do my best.”

“Seriously, what happened? Did the princess that you think so highly of pay you a compliment or something?”

“No. If she had, you’d know it.”

“Well that’s...disturbing.” Dennis shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

His mocking, faint smile got on my nerves. “If you don’t need me, then I’m leaving,” I said before starting to walk away. He didn’t try to keep me there.

“It’s great that you’re happy and all, but just be sure not to cause any trouble for your mistress.” He said this sluggishly and without particular urgency, and I didn’t turn to face him.

In truth, I didn’t care for his warning. I’d thought that I was being as alert in my duties as ever, and I certainly wouldn’t be causing any problems for Lady Rosemary.

I could admit that I was getting slightly carried away in my merriment, but I couldn’t be blamed for it—after all, I was about to accompany Lady Rosemary on her first big outing. And she’d asked me herself. I was so overjoyed by the prospect that I felt ready to draw my last breath. Well, that was a lie. Death would have to wait.

Just me and her, on a journey. Which means that I’ll be the only one for her to rely on. Me, and only me! What could be more lovely? I want to kneel before her and pledge to fulfill her every wish. Unfortunately, we’ll be pretending to be siblings while on the galley, so I’ll have to give up on that idea.

But still...we’ll be “siblings.” I’ll have the honor of calling Lady Rosemary my little sister. That doesn’t sound bad, I thought. My mouth crumpled into a smirk. Not bad at all. Good, in fact. Magnificent.

I imagined her calling me “Big Brother” in her sweet, piping voice, and the mere thought brought me indescribable pleasure. *Uh-oh, I feel like I might be discovering a side of myself that should’ve stayed hidden.*

I cleared my throat to disguise the strange noise that I’d almost let out. A passing maid shot me a suspicious look, but I ignored her. *Go ahead and side-eye me. You’re not Lady Rosemary, so I don’t care in the least.*

But if Lady Rosemary were to treat me coldly... Wait, I think that might actually work for me.

I pictured Lady Rosemary with her hands on her hips as she puffed out her cheeks. In my imagination, she'd say, "What's with that weird look on your face, Big Brother?!" And then, in my mind, my adorable little sister would pout and gaze up at me, definitively putting me in my place. "Get rid of that gross smirk!"

Just thinking about it made my face light up in rapture. I bit on my lips and moaned, "Oh, yes."

If it came from Lady Rosemary, then even verbal abuse was worth more than rewards or medals. The gaze that my gentlehearted princess showed me and me alone was icy, but it always sparked an inferno in my heart.

One thing must be made clear: my feelings weren't due to me having weird fetishes or anything like that. All that mattered was that Lady Rosemary gave me special treatment.

"Ah, Klaus, found you..." a carefree voice called out to me.

I turned around. The voice had come from Dennis, whom I'd parted with not long ago. After one look at my face, he grimaced. He'd raised his hand in greeting but now lowered it with a short groan.



“What?” I asked.

“I remembered that I wanted something from you, but never mind. It doesn’t matter anymore, so could you get lost?”

“What?”

“Look somewhere else! I don’t wanna see that look on your face! It’s terrifying me!!!” Dennis yelled, turning pale. “You’re supposed to always look unconcerned, aren’t you?!”

I poked at my cheeks and jaw with my left hand, unsure of what my face looked like to him, and then tilted my head.

Dennis let out a shrill scream.

How rude, I thought in a huff before returning to work. For some reason, everyone I met for the rest of the day gave me the same reaction that Dennis had.

Before I knew it, night had come. I’d finished most of the arrangements, so the people I’d tapped for coverage could carry on my work. Instead of returning to my own room, I headed somewhere else. The inside of the palace was bright even at night, illuminated by torches placed at regular intervals. I made my way outside, to the training grounds on the dark outskirts of the palace.

I passed by fewer and fewer people as I walked. In the distance, nocturnal birds were chirping. A warm breeze blew through, and sparks crackled from a watch fire by a guard post. Pebbles crunched beneath my boots as I trod on them. Though the training grounds were usually bustling at noon, they were perfectly still when I arrived. With the watch fire behind me, the shadow I cast into the darkness was long.

“You’re here,” called someone curtly in a low tone of voice. A tall figure pushed himself away from the wall that he’d been leaning against.

At the same time, the area became faintly illuminated as the moon emerged from behind its cloud cover. My eyes had been accustomed to the darkness, so the brightness was almost blinding. I squinted instinctively and then slowly

reopened my eyes.

A dark figure stood with the blue moon at his back. The wind swept through his black hair and the coattails of his knight's uniform. Moonlight delineated his silhouette, and his black eyes were peering at me.

I gasped. I couldn't see his face, but it felt like he had a sword at my throat. His stare was enough to overwhelm me.

"Do you need me for something, Captain?" I asked, feigning composure.

Without responding, the man—Leonhart von Orsein—threw something at me.

The object flew toward me in a parabolic trajectory, and I caught it with my left hand. It was a training sword with a dulled blade.

"Wait, so you called me out to—"

"To train, as you can see. We'll do this daily, until two nights before your departure."

"What?! Nobody told me this!" I bit back at once.

However, the captain was deaf to my protest. He took off the coat of his knight's uniform.

"It might not seem so to you, but I'm a busy person," I complained.

"What a coincidence," the captain said aloofly while rolling his shoulders. "I am as well."

Certainly, my task list was nothing compared to the captain's. Although I had an enormous amount of things that I needed to do early because of my trip, it was nothing compared to the workload of someone with an official position like the captain.

I shut my mouth.

"If that's all you have to say, then hurry up and prepare yourself."

I had more to say, but the captain wasn't the sort of person who'd back down. Realizing that arguing was pointless, I begrudgingly moved my fingers to the collar of my uniform.

“Why now, out of the blue...?” I grumbled.

I hadn’t truly been after an answer, but I got one anyway.

“The idea came to me today, after observing the way you’ve been acting recently.”

I flinched. Dennis’s words from that afternoon passed through my mind.

“Judging by that reaction,” the captain said, “you know what I’m talking about.”

I said nothing.

“I’ll take your silence as a ‘yes.’”

“It’s not like I’m causing anyone any trouble,” I protested.

“I’m telling you because you’re on the verge of doing just that. The princess cannot be entrusted to a man who can’t rein himself in.”

“What do you—?!”

I heard something zipping through the air, and, just like that, a sword had been thrust at my throat, too quick to follow with my eyes. The captain’s glare was as sharp as his dark-gray blade—no, more so. He’d narrowed his eyes to slits, and they reflected the moonlight and shone like those of a beast in the darkness.

I’d been confronted with his intensity directly, and a cold bead of sweat ran down my spine. His blade had no potential to harm me, but it still took my breath away. *If I even flinch, he’ll rip me apart.*

Before me was the Black Lion, who’d once been the scourge of the battlefield.

“Her Highness is a national treasure. She’s a jewel that we must protect at all costs. A man who can’t even react to my sword, as slow as I’m swinging it, has no place guarding her. The very idea is preposterous.”

I was astounded by his remark. *Slow?! That’s a funny way to describe it. I couldn’t even tell when his attack started!*

But when I checked, I saw that the captain wasn’t holding his sword in his dominant hand. *He can make moves like that using just his left hand?* I was

amazed to the point of stupefaction.

“Show me that you can at least deflect attacks from my left hand.” The captain pulled his sword away from my neck, spun it around, and then lowered it.

The sense of intimidation vanished as he disengaged and I exhaled deeply, emptying my lungs. My heartbeat was deafening.

“If you can’t, then tell me now. I’ll find another man for the job.”

Though my breathing was troubled, I replied at once. “No need!”

Giving my job to some other knight, now that’s what’s preposterous!

“That’s *my* job, and I won’t let anyone else have it.” I tensed the muscles in my stomach and shot him a challenging glare, but the captain’s expression didn’t change—not even a little.

“Don’t force yourself,” he said nonchalantly. “There are others who are suitable for the task.”

I couldn’t ignore that remark. A mad grin rose to my face. I knew that I was rising to an obvious provocation, but I’d heard too much to back down now. And even if it hadn’t been, I’d had enough of this nonsense.

There are others who are suitable for the task? You’ve said it now. Captain, you’re the one who’s been snatching my job from me at every opportunity.

The frustration and rage that I’d felt on the day when I’d watched Lady Rosemary leave for a clandestine trip to the port city... All of it resurged within me. At the time, I’d wanted to plead, “Why can’t it be me?” I’d wanted to push the captain out of the way and scream, “That’s where I belong!”

Truthfully, I detested the man in front of me who seemed to think that he deserved the faith that Lady Rosemary placed in him.

“I’ll make you take those words back.”

Seeing me brandish my sword, the captain smirked. “Go ahead and try.”

His calm and collected attitude caused my anger to spike.

I’ll knock you down to your knees at least once, I snarled in my mind. *And*

when I do, I'll be able to leave on this journey with a smile on my face.

The Sorcerers' Concern

On one side of the palace was a laboratory reserved for the exclusive use of the palace's sorcerers. Built with stone walls and a stone floor, the room had no personality; there were no frescos or stuccos ornamenting the space. Instead, there were complex patterns drawn on the floor.

At first glance, these would appear to be nothing more than geometric patterns—but they were, of course, not simply for decoration. The lines were actually a combination of special glyphs that formed a magic circle, and it had been constructed by the head sorceress, Irene von Altman.

This circle was extraordinary; by obstructing the diffusion of its user's magic, it allowed the user to draw on their full power while also minimizing leakage into the surrounding environment. When I'd explained this to the princess, she'd commented to herself, "So it's like a thermos flask." I still had no idea what she'd meant.

Standing in the center of the magic circle, I—Teo Eilenberg—closed my eyes and steadied my breathing, concentrating and summoning the power that flowed throughout my body. When I slowly opened my eyes, I could innately sense that their color had changed from earthen red to gold.

I had clasped one hand atop the other, and I slightly parted them to peek inside. There was a stone in my palm, about the size of my thumb, and I conjured the mental image of infusing my power into the stone.

Be patient. Take your time. Be precise, as if you're threading a needle.

The stone's color began to change, bit by bit, as though in manifestation of my mental image.

It's working. Keep it going, I encouraged myself. *Keep it going.*

But at that exact moment, a loud sigh from behind distracted me. The color that had started to accrue within the stone drained away, returning it to its original translucent state.

Disappointed, I sighed heavily, just as the boy behind me had. “Luuutz,” I groaned at my partner.

The boy in question, who was sitting in the corner of the room, sluggishly raised his head. “What?”

When I saw the dumb look on his face, I clenched my fists. “Don’t ‘what’ me. Do you know how many times I’ve had to listen to you sighing?”

He was silent for a moment. “Three?”

“Fifteen!” I responded immediately, glaring at him for not answering seriously.

Lutz didn’t seem to feel guilty. “You’ve been counting? Must have a lot of time on your hands,” he said with audible exasperation.

I squeezed my right fist and sensed my magical power surging into it. *Just let me hit him.* “I don’t! I’m trying to get this done, but I can’t because your constant sighs are all I can hear!” I stomped on the stone floor to vent my irritation. “If you don’t want to be here then stop distracting me and get out.”

After a pause, he said, “I never said I don’t wanna be here.”

I replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “How am I supposed to believe you when you’re sat over there on your ass with that stupid look on your face?”

Lutz raised an eyebrow, and then without speaking, he stood up and crudely patted the dust off of himself. He shot me a glare as if to say, “Happy now?”

I smirked. *A little goading always does the trick with him,* I thought. I walked over to the wall, allowing him to enter the magic circle.

He headed toward where I’d just been at the center of the circle but came to a stop before reaching it. He turned around and looked at me imploringly. There was silence while he hesitated, but then he spoke. “So you’re not thinking about it?”

He didn’t specify what “it” was, so he could’ve been asking about anything. However, I knew exactly what he wanted to know.

“Of course I am.”

In my mind, I saw the face of our younger friend, a girl who meant a great deal to both of us. We hadn't been able to see her over the last few days. She probably had her hands full preparing for her departure.

"You aren't worried about the princess?" Lutz asked sulkily.

I shot him down immediately. "Do you really think that?" I knew that Lutz wasn't saying it seriously, but I couldn't let the question pass unchallenged. My words insinuated a deeper query: *"You must be feeling the same way as I am, so are you seriously asking that?"*

"Sorry," muttered Lutz, seeming ashamed of himself.

When I saw his crestfallen reaction, I regained some of my composure. *Turns out, he isn't the only one on edge.* I let my irritation escape in a single sigh and then cast my eyes down, tousling the hair on the back of my head.

"Sorry," I apologized.

Lutz shook his head. "No. I started it."

"Yeah, but you always do." I purposefully put on a playful air. "I should've been the adult and just let it go," I jokingly replied.

Lutz relaxed and put on a smile. "Shut it."

Now that the atmosphere in the room had lightened, I felt relieved. It was always best to settle fights with my partner early on.

Lutz walked up next to me and leaned against the wall. Looking into the distance, he quietly said, "I've been wondering what I could do to stop her from leaving. The world out there is full of dangers. It's not the right environment for a fragile girl like the princess to have a fun, carefree trip. She might get into treacherous situations and see things that'll stick with her. The food won't taste anything like what she gets in the palace, and she'll be sleeping on stiffer beds. And most importantly, she might hurt herself, and then it'll be too late to do anything about that. This whole time, I've been wondering how to get her to understand all that."

"She'd flip if she heard you say that," I butted in, astounded. "She wouldn't want you treating her like a three-year-old." *You'd need to at least be more*

careful with your word choice if you wanna convince her.

The look on Lutz's face couldn't have been more serious though. "A three-year-old raised in the city would have a better chance of understanding what I'm talking about than the princess. She knows barely anything about the world outside the palace. She's never slept in musty beds, has never had to put up with the taste of weak, watery soup or half-rotten meat. And she doesn't know that some lives are worth less than a few coins, or about the horror of having to kill for bread crumbs, or any of it."

His moving speech wasn't delivered in a criticizing tone; he wasn't denigrating the princess, but merely stating facts. As our teacher had said, the princess's birth into the royal family had left her with responsibilities and hardships that we were unaware of. However, in the same way, some horrors and evils were only known to city dwellers, and no amount of talking could bridge that gap. A picture's worth a thousand words, and there's a world of difference between learning about something and experiencing it firsthand.

"I understand what you're getting at," I said, "but the princess won't be stopped."

I recalled the look on her face when she'd said, "Be here for me when I get back." Her smile had been gentle, but her eyes had harbored a look of indomitable determination. "She might not know hunger or hatred, but she knows what she has to do."

Lutz bit his lip and lowered his head. He looked frustrated, but he didn't dispute my words. I was sure that he knew, just as I did, how endlessly stubborn the princess was, and how consistently unpredictable she could be.

"And...she knows that we're genuinely worried about her."

"I know that..." Lutz began to slip down the wall he was leaning on. He crumpled into a sitting slump once more and buried his face between his knees. "That's why I couldn't say anything to her..."

From my higher elevation, I patted Lutz's head a few times.

"Don't treat me like a kid," he said, brushing my hand away, but I didn't mind.

"We can't keep her from going," I said, "but what we *can* do is send her off

with smiles. That's about the only thing left to us."

"We can give her the amulets too," he pointed out glumly.

"You've got that right," I agreed with a smirk.

The Reincarnated Princess Departs

While I occupied myself with my preparations, information gathering, and studies, the time seemed to fly by in an instant. Before I knew it, half a month had passed since I'd received my father's permission to leave the country, and the day of my departure had arrived.

It was still early in the morning, but the port city was alive with crowds. We struggled through the human current on the main street and reached the harbor, which was just as crowded as everywhere else. Families were seeing their loved ones off; travelers were exchanging heartfelt farewells—we slipped by them all, weaving our way between sailors finishing their preparations and getting ready to embark.

Soon, we approached our destination.

I sighed with amazement when I looked up and saw the ship against a backdrop of clear blue sky. "What a wonderful carrack."

The ship was a three-masted sailing vessel with square sails on its front two masts and a triangular fore-and-aft sail on the remaining mast. It had a wooden superstructure, and a hull constructed from carvel-built planks that had been painted blue. I estimated that the ship was twenty meters long. The magnificent vessel reminded me of the Santa Maria—the first ship to successfully traverse the Atlantic Ocean during the Age of Exploration.

My first time crossing the sea. My first voyage. My first trip abroad!

My head and my heart were both running wild. Of course, I was still apprehensive and scared about what would await me upon entering a strange land, but I was looking forward to it as well.

"Mary," called a youthful tenor voice. At the same time, a hand grasped mine from behind and pulled me backward.

I whipped around to find Klaus staring at me. He wasn't dressed in the knight's uniform that I was used to seeing. Instead, he wore black pants and

boots on his legs, and a white shirt with a plain, navy blue vest on his chest. The cloak that he wore atop his clothes was for more than just keeping him sheltered from the sun and the rain; it made the longsword strapped to his waist less conspicuous.

“I don’t want to lose sight of you, so don’t go off on your own,” Klaus said with a slightly worried frown.

I had to fight back a grimace after seeing Klaus’s easygoing, charming young man act. Instead, I managed a smile and said, “Sorry, Big Brother.”

Remember, Rose, you’re not allowed to say, “Who the hell are you supposed to be?!” I told myself this and obediently took my place next to Klaus.

I wasn’t Rosemary von Velfalt today. I was simply Mary, the daughter of Lord Julius’s friend, and Klaus’s younger sister—just a girl, on her way to visit her older sister who’d married a man in Flanmer.

In addition to using the dark-brown dye, I’d coarsely braided my hair and had parted it to one side to further alter my appearance. My attire consisted of a white hempen dress beneath a bright-blue overskirt. I was much more lightly dressed than usual, but I still felt boiling because, like Klaus, I was wearing a cloak.

“Watch where you’re walking,” Klaus warned with a gentle look on his face.

We headed toward the pier.

I couldn’t hide how shaken I felt by Klaus’s surprising acting talent; he really was skilled at pretending to be my brother. This was especially odd, given how disastrous his acting and demeanor had been at first.

For two days after I’d invited him to accompany me, his excitement had been sickening, and he’d smiled far too much when I’d tested out calling him “Big Brother.” It didn’t matter how hot a person was if their smile was that disturbing. And when we’d been alone in my room, and I’d made him practice speaking to me without the usual formalities, the results had been an unnatural mess... “Your Highness” and “Lady Rosemary” and other formal expressions had still slipped into his speech.

But one day, he’d arrived with a more serious demeanor, and each

subsequent day, he'd turned up with a fresh bruise or a new scrape along with an improvement in his attitude.

What in the world happened to Klaus? Well, whatever it is, I should be grateful that he's calmed down.

A big sailor walked toward us, coming from the direction we were headed. He looked down at me and interrupted my distressed thought process.

"Wow, what an adorable passenger we have here," he said. "You going on a trip with your brother?"

"Yes," I replied. "I hope that we have a pleasant voyage together."

"You've got great manners, miss. I hope you enjoy your stay." Laugh lines creased his manly, sunburnt face, and he bellowed laughter as he patted my head with his large hands. "Wonderful little sister you've got, mister. I bet she means the world to you."

Klaus smiled in response to the sailor's small talk. "Yes, I'm proud to be her brother."

The current Klaus was the perfect handsome man, no matter how you looked at him. He appeared calm, his entire demeanor was relaxed, and he stood with great posture. Personality-wise, he was a little taciturn, but he still appeared kind and affectionate toward his "sister." Strangely though, I didn't feel attracted to him. In fact, I couldn't get my goose bumps to subside.

Klaus shouldn't pose any danger while he's acting like a normal hot guy, but I'm getting the sense that I'm witnessing something I shouldn't. I wonder why.

"This time we sure do have a fine showing of gorgeous women on the ship," the sailor remarked.

"There are other female passengers?" Klaus asked.

I'd been scratching my arm and trying to avoid making eye contact with Klaus, but their conversation piqued my interest and I raised my head back up.

"Yeah, look," the sailor said.

I stared in the direction that the sailor pointed and saw a group that stood out from everyone else here.

A girl who was a year or two older than me was walking along the pier at the head of a retinue of armor-clad guards and women who seemed to be her maids. She was a beautiful girl with wavy, strawberry-blond hair and blue, downturned eyes. The light dotting of freckles on her pale skin just added to her charm. She must've come from a well-to-do family, judging by the lavish amounts of lace and frills decorating her dress and the white parasol she held aloft.

She does look elegant, but I can't be the only one who doesn't think she's dressed appropriately for a sea voyage.

"Will she be traveling with us on the ship?" Klaus asked. He was perfectly synchronized with my thoughts. His brows were furrowed, so he probably had the same concern that I did.

"She is," the sailor confirmed. "Rumor has it that she's from a good family, and related to the Eigels. Also, and don't let this get out, but..." He leaned toward Klaus, put a hand near his mouth as though he were telling secrets, and lowered his voice. He was a loud person anyway though, so I still heard him when he said, "Word has it that she's the 'goddess' everyone's been talking about."

"Goddess?" I called out, stunned.

The goddess that everyone's been talking about? Which goddess would that happen to be?

"What?" Klaus asked suspiciously, a few moments after me. The terribly low tone of his voice caused me to look up, and I noticed that he'd narrowed his eyes in extreme suspicion.

When did Klaus drop the nice guy act, and why's he so pissed off?

I grew pale with trepidation at the thought that Klaus might've blown his cover, but the sailor continued talking, oblivious to Klaus's change in demeanor. "Hmm? You two haven't heard of her?" the sailor asked. "The goddess is what they call the inventor of this food that's been flying off of the shelves recently. It's called the 'Dew of the Sea.'"

Wait, back up a second. I did just hear him say "Dew of the Sea," didn't I?

Don't tell me...

"That Julius claims she's an absolute stunner," the sailor explained, "and like a goddess, her heart's as beautiful as she is."

Never mind, he's not talking about me after all. This sailor had me going for a second there.

"Why do you think that woman is the goddess?" Klaus asked. "Good looks alone are a poor basis for coming to that conclusion."

"Well, she looks like that, and moreover, she's kin with the Eigers. Plus, somebody heard from Julius that the goddess is a beautiful woman with blue eyes and hair as blonde as the sun. This gal's a perfect fit, no?"

Klaus shot a cold look toward the girl and muttered disdainfully, "Like the sun? Since when did the sun stop shining?"

I snatched Klaus's hand. "B-Big Brother! I'd love to board the ship now!!!"

As I walked toward the ship, dragging Klaus behind me, the sailor put on a friendly smile, waved his hand, and said, "Sorry for holding you up."

I don't think he suspects us, but I nearly had a heart attack.

"Big Brother, could you try a little harder to keep your act up?" I complained. I sent him a light glare and nonchalantly let go of his hand.

However, he turned his head away with a look of disgust. "I didn't want the goddess who invented the Dew of the Sea to be degraded to the level of an impostor like that."

Prior to our departure, I'd informed Klaus of some of my circumstances. Of course, I hadn't included the possibility of the pandemic or my knowledge of the future. Instead, I'd told him that we were traveling to Flanmer in search of a medicine and that George and the others would be assisting us. I'd also mentioned that I'd invented the Dew of the Sea and that Lord Julius had marketed it on my behalf.

That was the reason why Klaus had bristled a moment ago.

It all turned out just fine for me though. This way, I don't stand out. Being a known figure would only make my job that much harder.

However, that rationalization wouldn't be enough to satisfy Klaus.

How should I deal with this? I thought as I watched the dejected look on his face.

"Listen, Big Brother—"

The mellow tones of a woman's voice overlapped my own. "Mary!"

Hearing my alias called, I widened my eyes in surprise. *I asked for nobody to come and send me off. And I can't think of many people who'd call me by that name.*

Klaus casually shuffled in front of me, shielding me with his body. From behind him, I cast my eyes across our surroundings.

The voice rained down from above. "I'm up here on the ship."

I gasped when I found her, a beautiful woman leaning over the handrails and waving to me. "Bianca!"

"I'm glad I get to see you again," she said. "It looks like we'll be sailing together!"

The gorgeous woman smiling at me was Michael's older sister, Bianca von Diebolt, whom I'd become acquainted with a few days before.

Why's Big Sis Bianca here?! I thought, dumbstruck, but I soon came to my senses. After swiftly concluding the formalities for boarding the ship, I climbed the wooden plank which acted as a ramp and then charged toward Bianca, who was waiting with her arms outstretched.

She pulled me into a hug as soon as I set foot on the ship.

"Oof...!" I wheezed.

"It's been so long! I've missed you, Mary!"

To my surprise, I found my head buried in her bountiful bosom. I tapped her arm and complained that I was suffocating. "B-Bianca, I can't...breathe."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I was just so happy to see you..." She hurriedly set me free. "You're as cute as ever today... Hang on..." Bianca's words cut off as she stared at me with a broad grin. It seemed that she'd noticed something. She took a

step backward, ran her eyes up and down my body, and then tilted her head. "You seem a little different from the last time I saw you."

"I...suppose."

So the effects of my transformation have peaked at "a little different." My shock was all the greater for the amount of effort I'd invested in changing my look. *I don't have the same hairstyle or the same clothes, or even the same hair color!*

Is that all I get? Is that really all?

After hearing my evasive response, Bianca appeared to ponder something for a while. Then she brought her face close to mine and whispered in my ear, "Are you here in disguise?"

"Huh?!" My head flung up and cold sweat dripped down my forehead. I feared that my true identity had been found out. "How...?"

"I knew it! I did think that a girl as well-mannered as you must be from a noble family, but this settles it," Bianca whispered, grinning like a child whose prank had worked as intended.

Seems like she hasn't figured out that I'm a princess. I exhaled a sneaky sigh of relief.

"Oh, that means I should apologize for shouting your name out." Bianca deflated slightly. "Everyone could hear that."

"It's all right," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not likely to run into many people I know, and this disguise is only an extra precaution. It isn't meant to be perfect, as you can tell since you saw through it immediately."

Bianca's eyes widened. "You do look completely different though! I didn't recognize you at first."

"Really?"

"Really. I spotted a girl walking along the pier and I thought to myself, 'She's so my type...' Uh, I mean, 'so cute.' I only realized it was you after I kept watching."

I had the feeling that an unsettling phrase had snuck into her words, but I'd

probably misheard her. *Why do I have the chills all of a sudden?*

She smiled, still standing right next to me. I listened to my instincts and retreated a step away from her seductive grin.

Suddenly, an arm grabbed me from behind and pulled me backward.

“Whoa!” I cried as I lost my balance and stumbled, but then I was cushioned by a toned chest.

“Mary, it’s about time that we take the luggage to our room,” Klaus said.

“Brother...”

The one guilty of pulling me back had been Klaus. *Whoops. I completely forgot Klaus existed.*

“Brother? As in, Mary’s?”

“Umm, yes,” I confirmed. “This is my brother—”

“Klaus.” He finished my sentence and put on his brightest smile. “It appears that you’ve already met my sister.”

His expression looked horribly disingenuous to me, but it probably seemed like a lovely smile from a decent young man to anyone who lacked familiarity with Klaus. I raised my head and glanced over to Bianca, feeling conflicted about whether I wanted her to fall for it. Contrary to my expectations though, Bianca didn’t appear to have been charmed by Klaus. Far from it. In fact, I could’ve sworn that I saw a slight furrowing of her beautiful brows.

“I’m Bianca,” she introduced herself succinctly, still appearing suspicious. She’d probably withheld her last name to keep her noble heritage a secret from the others on the ship, but even allowing for that, she’d been overly curt.

Bianca crossed her arms and stared at Klaus fixedly as though she were weighing him up. “For a brother, you don’t look all that similar to Mary.”

We’d anticipated this observation and had prepared a reply. “That’s true,” I said, “I take after our mother, and he takes after our father.”

“Hmmm.” Bianca hummed with a slow nod, seeming unconvinced.

“Mary, we should be going,” Klaus prompted.

“Oh, er, yes. Goodbye, Bianca.”

“Sorry for keeping you,” Bianca apologized with a farewell wave. “I’ll see you soon.”

I waved back at her and then obeyed Klaus and walked away.

“That woman acts far too friendly with you,” Klaus muttered as we moved toward our cabin, walking side by side.

I lightly punched his arm and ordered him to resume his act. “Big Brother, watch your tone.” We were alone, but I wanted to remain vigilant.

“I don’t like the way that she looks at you... It’s perverse,” he complained.

Look who’s talking.

“Don’t let her looks fool you,” he continued. “She may be attractive, but I can tell that she’s rotten on the inside.”

Look who’s talking! Klaus is completely oblivious to the fact that he’s describing himself perfectly.

While pretending to listen to Klaus’s never-ending tirade, I carried on walking, but when the deck rocked beneath me I instinctively propped myself up against a nearby wall.

“We’ve set sail,” Klaus said, casually helping me to regain my balance.

So that wasn’t just a sudden bout of dizziness. I looked over to the harbor and saw that our ship had begun to move, just as Klaus had said. I pulled away from him, latched my hands onto the handrails, and peered down over the side. The ship was drifting away from the pier, and the figures waving farewell to their friends and loved ones gradually diminished in size.

When I leaned my body over the handrails, a splash of seawater carried by the ocean breeze misted across my head.

“This is it,” I whispered quietly to myself.

My first voyage has now begun. With that thought, my fingers gripped the handrail even more tightly. *When will I see this port again? Do I have it in me to complete this mission? Will I be able to return home with my head held high?*

I shook my head to dislodge my worries and focused on the scenery in front of me. I began to scan the entirety of the port city from left to right so that I would always remember this panoramic view, but I stopped suddenly.

On a hill in the western end of the port city, I spotted a figure.

Was the person there to see someone on this ship off? They were pulling a black horse along by its reins, and the hood of their cloak disguised whether they were a man or a woman. Out of curiosity, I kept my eyes trained on the figure. Our ship was sailing west and would pass right by that hill. *Will I get a glimpse of their face?* I thought.

As though they'd read my mind, the person threw off their hood. Black hair emerged from the cloak, fluttering in the wind. There was a keen glint in the man's jet-black eyes, which were pointed directly at me.

The sight of him took my breath away. I couldn't believe my own eyes and I asked myself if it was truly him. In an attempt to regain my composure, I told myself, *No, it can't be. I need to stop thinking that everything will go how I want it to.* But my heart didn't listen and was screaming with delight.

"Sir Leon," I mouthed. A tear trickled from the corner of my eye. I was so overwhelmed with joy that I lost my ability to speak, and I pursed my lips tightly together. No words came out, only a sob.

He's come to see me off. I'd been the one who'd told him not to come, and yet, I was elated that he had. The love that I felt for Sir Leonhart was so powerful that my heart ached.

I wiped away the tears that I had no control over and forced my lips to smile. He wouldn't see me for some time now, and I didn't want his last image of me to be a teary-eyed face.

"I'll do my best," I said, waving my hand just once.

Sir Leonhart knelt on the ground and bowed his head.

"I'll be waiting for your return."

Of course, we were too far apart for our voices to travel, but even so, I felt like I could hear him say that.



The Reincarnated Princess on a Voyage

While I was sorting through my luggage in the room allocated to us, a voice called out to me from behind. “You seem to be in high spirits.”

Only then did I realize that I’d been humming to myself. *He has a point. I am in quite the good mood.* “Something good happened,” I said proudly.

His voice deepened. “Hmmm...”

I set down the luggage that I’d been holding and looked over my shoulder. Klaus was leaning against the wall and scowling, visibly annoyed and grumbling away to himself. His mutters sounded something like, “Next time I *will* knock him down to his knees, I swear.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I felt that my safest course of action was to refrain from finding out.

“Also, Big Brother, watch your tone,” I warned. “I shouldn’t have to keep reminding you.”

For the moment, Klaus had trouble finding a reply. “Can’t I at least speak freely when we’re alone in this room?” He pouted like a child after a scolding and explained that addressing me with anything less than proper deference was quite stressful for him. “I care for you and respect you, so being required to speak discourteously is an almost unbearable ordeal for me.” Klaus’s protest carried the utmost passion. “It makes me feel like my loyalty to you is being tested.”

“You’re overthinking it,” I bluntly denied. *I don’t know what you expected from me, spewing that nonsense with a straight face.*

However, my attempt at getting him to back off wasn’t met with success.

“Please... I’m begging you,” he pleaded, his lips quivering in a look of anguish.

Neither of us said a word for over ten seconds until I finally broke the silence. “As long as I have your word that you won’t slip up when we’re not in this

room...”

I'll just have to live with it, I thought.

Our cabin was small, but it belonged to us; nobody else was staying in here. The thin walls did give me pause, but the next room over was just cargo storage. As long as he made sure to switch personas when we left the cabin, we probably wouldn't face any problems.

In truth, I would've preferred him to spend more time using his disguised manner of speech so that it would become second nature to him. I wasn't willing to insist further though, because doing so might push him toward a mental breakdown.

“Thank you very much!” Klaus bowed his head ecstatically.

When I saw the innocent, childlike grin on his face, I thought better of treating him as coldly as I usually would. I returned an awkward smile, heaved a sigh, and then returned to sorting out my baggage.

As I was carefully removing each individual item from our cases, my hands stopped. “Oh, I nearly forgot,” I said, retrieving a rolled-up piece of paper and offering it to Klaus.

“What is it?” Klaus asked as he took the paper from me.

“It arrived from Flanmer,” I said without further elaboration.

Klaus wasn't dumb, and that was all the hint he needed to understand what this was. His expression stiffened and he began to read in silence.

This was a letter from George—his latest report—which had arrived shortly before our departure. George and Michael had asked some questions to townsfolk in the ports, villagers in the mountains, and travelers on the road; this had apparently furnished them with valuable information.

The report stated that a certain tribe resided in a village somewhere among the mountains in the southwest of Flanmer. They lived deep in the mountains, growing medicinal herbs and making potent remedies. Collectively, the tribespeople were known as the Khuer.

“A family of medicine makers,” Klaus remarked as he scanned the letter. “This

could be an important lead.”

“Yes. Although it seems that they’re having trouble locating the village.”

It was probable that the Khuer tribe knew about the medicine that I was searching for. George had thought so as well and had narrowed his investigation to focus on them. So far though, they’d had little luck making further progress.

The Khuer were solitary people who maintained little contact with outsiders. They would regularly descend from their mountain to sell medicine, but they’d hide their faces and converse as little as possible. Wealthy merchants and nobles had offered to employ them before, in recognition of their profound medicinal knowledge and the quality of their creations, but every offer had been declined. The reclusive Khuer disdained outside interference. Thanks to that, few even knew the location of their home village.

“I hope that they make some progress before we reach them, but that doesn’t seem likely,” Klaus said, his brows furrowed.

I nodded. “Well, whatever the case, we can’t do anything about it from this cabin. Let’s focus on our immediate concerns.”

Now that I’d finished sorting all of my luggage, I stood up.

“Where are you going?” Klaus asked.

“I want to take a look around the ship, above and below deck, and get to know what’s where. And of course, I’d like to find out whom we’re traveling with.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

I grasped the doorknob, but then stopped and looked back over my shoulder.

“Pull yourself together, Big Brother.”

“*Switch personalities,*” was the message I sent with my eyes.

With a single blink, my loyal knight took on the persona of a kind older brother. “Yeah. Off we go,” he urged, quite tenderly.

I opened the door and stepped outside.

“Everything is in quite good order,” Klaus said as we headed to the deck.

We’d made the rounds, exploring everywhere that we had access to, and true to what Klaus had said, the cleanliness below deck was immaculate. It might sound rude to say that I’d expected otherwise, but I’d honestly imagined more mess and disrepair.

“The ship isn’t new, so they must be looking after it well,” I remarked. I stamped the sole of my shoe onto the floor. The floorboards had clearly been around for years, but meticulous polishing gave them a sheen. We hadn’t spotted any obvious dirt or stains and hadn’t smelled any foul odors when we’d passed by the kitchens. It was nice when a ship was well maintained.

All the cargo was stacked neatly and tied down to prevent a collapse, and although the passageways were narrow, they were free of obstructions from luggage and equipment. We wouldn’t have to worry about our escape routes being blocked in an emergency, just so long as the crew remained calm.

“And the sailors are kind and friendly,” I said. “I like this ship.” *I can see why Lord Julius recommended it*, I thought as I climbed the stairs to the upper deck.

The moment that we stepped foot onto the deck from the stairs, we heard a shout. “This is too hot!”

Surprised, I cast my eyes around, but nobody was looking at me. I surmised that the complaint had been directed at someone else. Following the gazes of the sailors and passengers, I spotted a group of people.

“I can’t drink this if it’s not cold!” The voice came from a beautiful girl who was yelling with unveiled irritation. “Hurry up and bring me a cold one!”

I recognized her as the girl that the sailor had called “goddess.” She was seated on a deck chair beneath a parasol held by her chamberlain, and she was currently glaring at a young maid.

“B-But Lady Flora, there’s no ice room here, so, um, how should I—?”

“I don’t care!” screamed the girl called Flora. “Figure it out for yourself and get it done!”

“A-As you wish.” The maid bowed her head with tears in her eyes.

Flora wrinkled her nose in aggravation as she watched the maid walk away. “That girl is useless,” Flora hissed while she cooled herself down by waving a gorgeous lace fan. “She doesn’t think about my needs.”

“Please forgive her, My Lady,” her chamberlain urged, soothing. “I will have a word with her later.”



I watched on in stupefaction and a sort of groan escaped my lips. “Yikes...”

“She’s a piece of work,” Klaus commented from beside me, voice filled with open disgust. “I wouldn’t call *that* a ‘goddess.’”

Perhaps I should’ve reined him in and warned him about being rude, or told him to watch what he said, but a small part of me agreed that the girl was being unreasonable. After all, it was obvious that we needed to preserve fresh water on a sea voyage.

“Now!” bellowed the oppressive voice of the girl who shared a name with the goddess of spring and flowers.

I’m looking at a cliché, I thought with a strange mix of revulsion and amazement. She is the stereotype of a spoiled noble girl.

The maid passed by my side as she returned. “I’ve brought you lemon water, Lady Flora!” She hurried toward Flora carrying a pitcher and a glass.

Slices of lemon floated in the water that filled the pitcher, and the sailors standing near me furrowed their brows at the sight. It’s been said once already, but on sea voyages, fresh water is precious. The same is true for fruit, of course.

We weren’t embarking on a grand expedition across the ocean, but that didn’t excuse supply waste. After all, one can never be too prepared; the unforeseen could strike at any moment, so it paid to be economical.

However, though the sailors wore sour expressions, they didn’t complain out loud. A bead of sweat ran down my spine when I heard one of them mutter, “If she’d been anyone but the goddess...”

Could it be that their misunderstanding is causing them to hold back criticism? Are they putting up with her because they’ve benefited from the Dew of the Sea?

I blanched. *What should I do? What can I do?*

Maybe I should stick up my hand and say, “Hey guys, I’m actually the goddess that came up with the Dew of the Sea, LOL!!!”

Nope. I can’t, and I really don’t want to. I haven’t done anything to deserve that fate.

“You took all that time to make a little lemon water?” Flora griped. “You could’ve surprised me.”

“M-My apologies.”

Flora shut her fan with a click. “Fine, whatever, just pour me a glass already,” she ordered pompously.

The maid quickly handed the glass to her mistress and poured out some lemon water. Flora raised the glass to her lips without uttering a word of thanks and then her beautiful eyebrows arched upward. “What’s this supposed to be?! It’s *warm!*”

Mm-hmm, of course it is, I sniped in my mind. *She told you there’s no ice room.*

As I watched the exchange with bated breath, Flora shoved the glass back at the maid. “I don’t want it!”

Hold on, okay. Time-out. Why aren’t you bothered by doing this in front of the whole ship? I’m over here cringing on your behalf...

I gently rubbed my stomach, which was beginning to ache.

“Huh? B-But what should I do with this?” the maid asked.

“Throw it away!”

I sensed a wave of seething anger rippling through everyone watching. The sailors glared and tutted, and by my side, I saw all expression vanish from Klaus’s face. A male passenger standing some distance away from us heaved a sigh and scowled.

“But—”

“Throw it away, I said! Are you deaf?!”

Please, please, please stop! Don’t say anything else!!!

“Wait, please!” I interjected. I couldn’t hold my silence any longer. Stepping into the space between Flora and the maid, I disrupted the barrage of abuse. My error in judgment became clear when I noticed that everyone’s attention was now focused on me.

Shit. So much for not sticking out...

“And you are?” Flora asked.

“I’m... Uhhh...” I’d instinctively plunged myself into the situation, but I hadn’t given any thought about what specifically I was going to do.

Flora examined me from head to toe. Her gorgeous eyebrows knitted together in a look of displeasure. “The way you’re dressed... You must be a commoner. Are you aware of how insulting it is for you to address me directly?”

“F-Forgive me,” I said after a pause. “But water is precious. If it’s going to be thrown away anyway, could you give it to me instead?”

“My! How base. You ought to be ashamed, asking for other people’s waste.” Flora turned her face away, opened her fan, and used it to cover her mouth. She peered at me with disgust out of the corner of her eyes.

I felt my confidence waver. I’d been hoping to ride this out with a smile, but I had to struggle to keep my expression from looking fraught. Somebody pulled my hand and I felt something firm touch the back of my head.

“That’s enough. Come here, Mary.”

His voice was low as it rang against my eardrums, and it sounded like he was forcefully subduing strong emotion. I nervously raised my head and saw that Klaus was wearing a pretty smile. However, that smile did not reach his eyes.

Oh God, I wanna get out of here.

“Don’t be so reckless,” he said. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“S-Sorry... I think?”

He was still holding me close, and he started stroking my hair.

Isn’t this a bit too cozy?! I discreetly pushed at his stomach with my elbow so that nobody else would notice, and then gestured with my eyes for him to back away. However, Klaus maintained both his smile and his firm grip on my shoulders.

He’s punishing me, I know it. This is payback for my intervention.

“Excuse me, who might you be?” Flora asked.

Flora's focus had now abandoned me, and she gazed over my shoulders at Klaus. Her cheeks were tinted red and her eyes sparkled. I almost couldn't recognize her as the same person that'd been glaring at me a moment before. I was flummoxed by Flora's dramatic change, but she paid no attention to me and instead stared passionately at Klaus.

"My name is Flora. Could you tell me yours?" she asked bashfully.

Klaus shot her a chilly look. "What good will learning my name do you?"

The difference in their attitudes was so chilling that I was worried I'd catch a cold.

"I thought that we could get to know each other," she replied. "If it's no inconvenience to you..." Flora's persistence even after Klaus's ice-cold glare was almost praiseworthy.

What's making her so enthusiastic? Is it his appearance? Just his good looks? It was certainly true that, in the visual department, he was top quality. Klaus, with his attractive looks and easygoing demeanor, was the manifestation of a young girl's ideal man. Although, that could be hard to remember when his personality was unseemly enough to offset his fabulous handsomeness.

"It *is* an inconvenience," Klaus growled with a contradictory bright smile.

"Sorry?" Flora said, stunned. Judging by the look on her face, she couldn't comprehend what he'd said.

"It's quite fanciful for you to want to 'get to know' a *commoner* like me," Klaus said, putting particular emphasis on the word "commoner."

I was taken aback.

His hostility toward her was plainly evident, and Flora froze. After a few seconds, the meaning of his words appeared to register in her mind, and her pale, beautiful skin flushed bright red. However, this time the cause wasn't bashfulness or attraction, but embarrassment and anger.

"Oh, right! You *appeared* to be well brought up, so I gave you a chance, but I was clearly wasting my time."

"Yes, you were. I apologize for dragging this out."

I gasped. *Why are you goading her?!* Klaus had surely noticed that I'd gone pale, but he didn't do anything about his pugilant attitude. *He must be pretty pissed off.*

"I want you out of my sight, now!"

"No need to tell me," Klaus responded with an aloof smile, entirely unfazed by the threatening tone in Flora's voice. He flung his arm over my shoulder, swiveled us around, and started to walk away. However, he paused after only a few steps. "Oh, I nearly forgot. Could we have that water?" he asked, before adding, "Since you don't want it."

"Do what you want!" Flora fumed, her eyebrows arched in exasperation.

The maid's eyes darted nervously between us and her mistress. After a moment of hesitation, she handed the pitcher and the glass to me.

Klaus waited until both were in my hands before pushing me forward and saying, "Thank you very much. Right, let's go." He put a lot of force into his bony hand where it pressed against my back, and this spoke volumes about his firm determination to get me away as soon as possible.

"I can't believe him," Flora grumbled. "He thinks he's special just because he's *somewhat* easy on the eyes... He couldn't hold a candle to Lord George."

I'd started to walk away at Klaus's urging, but I had to whip my head back around after hearing Flora's comment. However, Klaus wasn't about to let me stop. He kept his hands on my shoulders and practically forced me to leave the scene.

"Wait, Big Brother! Did you hear the name she just—"

"Never mind that," Klaus responded. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Well, uh, sure, it doesn't have anything to do with me *directly*, but—"

"It has nothing to do with you."

"Did you need to say that twice?"

Regardless, Klaus stubbornly prevented me from returning to Flora. I glanced up at him and sighed. Beneath me, my legs took one step after another, propelled by Klaus's momentum as he pushed and dragged my body forward.

On the way, I began to consider what I'd heard. *Is George the purpose of Flora's trip?*

Already, more than a month had passed since George had left for Flanmer in search of the medicine, and his return to Nevel didn't seem likely to happen anytime soon.

Is Flora chasing after him? Or planning to visit him? If so, then I have to hand it to her—that's one hell of a mission to put yourself through for romance.

"Mary, stop thinking so much and watch where you're walking," Klaus instructed bitterly while I was deep in thought. "Drive that rich twerp of a boy from your mind."

"Okaaay," I replied, slightly miffed by Klaus's choice of words. Uncovering Flora's objective wouldn't change what I could do at the present moment, so I decided to focus on my immediate concerns for now.

First of all, I've gotta find something to do with this water. I looked up at Klaus and said, "Big Brother, we should take this to the kitch—"

But then, someone spoke over me. "Hey, miss!"

I looked around and saw a man waving his hand at us as he walked down a flight of stairs.

Am I the "miss" he's talking to?

We stopped moving as he ran up to us, and I recognized him as one of the sailors that'd been on deck. He appeared to be in his midthirties and had tanned skin and stiff brown hair. His eyes were the same shade of brown, and they had a piercing look to them. The weak of heart wouldn't find it easy to make eye contact with this man.

He leaned over and brought his face close to mine. His frame was large and muscular, so it was incredibly intimidating to have him staring down at me. I froze.

He watched me for a second and then broke into a surprisingly friendly smile. "Thanks, miss."

My eyes grew round upon hearing his unexpected gratitude. "Huh?" *Why am*

I being thanked? I wondered and cocked my head.

The sailor's smile grew remorseful. "You told that spoiled little lady not to waste water." He scratched his cheek, seeming slightly ashamed. "We oughta be the ones telling her. Sorry for leaving it to you."

"No, it's fine!" I flung my head left and right. "I should've thought things through properly before intervening... I'm sure I made things worse."

I knew that my reckless actions had put everyone on edge. He must've been worried about me, but I'd done nothing to deserve his thanks or an apology. My head started to droop, but the sailor's words stopped me.

"Of course not. If you hadn't said anything, the situation would've only gotten more tense." His large hand patted my head. "You're brave...and you're kind." He then turned to Klaus. "You must be proud of her."

"I am... Although I have to keep my eyes on her, since she has a habit of acting rashly," Klaus said with a frown.

So many relevant examples sprang to my mind that I didn't even bother to argue. I began to frown as well. In stark contrast to our moods, the sailor beamed and roared with laughter.

"You two get along great."

Klaus smiled and nodded. "We do."

I neither smiled nor nodded. "We do?"

"Yep, you do." He chuckled, watching Klaus's and my polar opposite reactions. "I'm called Paul. Could you tell me your names?"

"Of course," I agreed. Klaus and I introduced ourselves.

Paul the sailor told us that he worked on this ship and spent most of his time managing the kitchen.

Oh, that's perfect, I thought. I tried to just give him the pitcher of water, but somehow, we ended up agreeing to a tour of the kitchen.

It was smaller than I'd imagined. The low height of the blackened ceiling made me feel claustrophobic. Stacks of crates and barrels, as well as large pots and

other cooking implements, were littered around the floor space, adding to the room's confined feeling. Although, I should note that the kitchen was kept as clean as everywhere else on the ship; the floorboards had a beautiful luster, which was the result of polishing rather than stray oil stains.

Two sailors were in the kitchen when we entered, and they looked at me with surprise. They turned to Paul, seeking an explanation.

"What's all this, Paul? Bringing along quite the cute passenger with you."

"So you were picking up girls instead of slogging it in here with us?" asked the smaller of the two.

"Yeah." Paul puffed out his chest. "I've done well for myself, and don't be afraid to tell me so!"

The smaller sailor hurled insults and an apron at Paul. "Shut your big gob! There's tons of work to do, so get on with it!"

Paul caught the apron with ease and tucked it under his armpit. "Like I don't know that. But first..." He began to rifle through a nearby barrel. "Huh? Where'd my apples go?"

"Oh, you mean the ones you told us you bought to present to that goddess?" asked the smaller sailor.

"I ate them," admitted the larger one.

"Why?!" Paul asked. "I could see Jan doing that, but you, Kurt?!"

"What'd you say about me?" the smaller of the two said indignantly. He must've been Jan.

"There's no chance in hell that girl's the goddess," the other—Kurt, a young man with blond hair—said venomously through a lovely smile. He gave Paul a thumbs-up sign. "It was in your apples' best interests. I'm sure they were glad to be gobbled up by me since it saved them from *her*."

Jan looked at Kurt with disillusionment. "The real deal's never what the rumors make 'em out to be. Open your eyes, Kurt."

"You're wrong. She's not the goddess, and the real one's out there somewhere! A lady who's humble and reserved and kindhearted... She exists, I

know it.”

And there goes any chance of me fessing up to who I am, I realized, and my eyes glazed over. The “goddess” had acquired an existence all her own, and her reputation was morphing into someone entirely different from me. Kurt’s dreams had been crushed once already; I couldn’t do that to him again.

That aside, what exactly has Flora been playing at? She’s managed to damage her reputation even with the people in this kitchen, and they weren’t on deck for her outburst a few minutes ago.

Paul called out to Jan and Kurt to quell their argument. “Cut it out, you two. We’ve got a guest.” He scratched up and down his head. “Argh, that’s all the apples eaten... Just when I thought I was gonna give them to this girl,” Paul muttered.

Kurt grew pale. “Huh?”

“Sorry about that, miss,” Paul apologized sincerely. “I dragged you all the way to the kitchen for nothing.”

Behind him, Kurt began to squirm. He paced back and forth, pale faced. I knew that I shouldn’t find it funny, but I did. *These three make a lovable team.*

I smiled and shook my head. “Please don’t worry about it. I was looking for something to do anyway.”

Kurt seemed visibly relieved.

“That aside, I don’t mind helping in here if you’d like a hand,” I offered while glancing at a barrel’s worth of potatoes and carrots.

Paul politely declined. “I appreciate the offer, but we can’t ask that of you. Go up above deck with your brother and relax, maybe enjoy the scenery.”

I can’t imagine three people getting through all this work by themselves though. Even if I just peeled potatoes, I could be helpful.

From his position at my side, Klaus raised his head as though he’d had an idea. He started to speak for the first time since we’d entered the kitchen. “Do you mind if we stay here?”

I looked up at him with round eyes, surprised by his question.

“I’d like to keep my little sister as far away from that woman as I can,” he continued.

“What’s wrong with taking it easy in your cabin?” Paul asked.

“I would do that, if my sister could keep still.”

Paul clapped his hands together like the penny had dropped. “Ah, I get it!”

Oh, so that comment swayed you? I’m not sure how I feel about that.

However, after reflecting on my own restless actions, I had no grounds to argue. Besides, I definitely didn’t want to be isolated in a cabin with Klaus—I’d be happier putting my hands to work than I would be just twiddling my thumbs.

“So you don’t mind helping out?” Paul asked.

“I’d love to!” I nodded, smiling.

“I’ll help as well,” Klaus added.

“No, you should sit this one out, Big Brother.” His participation was the last thing I wanted, and I glared at him to ward off his offer.

His eyes widened. From the look on his face, it seemed that he had no idea why I wasn’t eager to let him join in. The sight made me want to cradle my head in my hands.

He still has no understanding of how utterly hopeless he is when it comes to cooking...

The First Prince Feels Anxious

I—Christoph von Velfalt—adjusted my cravat in the mirror.

Inspecting my hair and clothes, I ensured that they were neat and tidy, then looked at my face's reflection with a sigh. It was in an awful state. I always had a pale complexion and an unwelcoming gaze, but the addition of faint, dark bags beneath my eyes aggravated my unhealthy appearance.

A phantom image of my father crept into my mind, coldly chastising me: "*No good statesman allows their weariness to show. Do better.*"

My mood deteriorated.

I turned away from my mirror and looked outside the window. The morning sun was shining dazzlingly in the clear blue sky, and the breeze was gentle.

The seas will be calm. I recalled how my sister had looked when she'd visited my room last night. She'd grown taller since the last time I'd seen her, which had admittedly been quite a while ago, and she'd also seemed a little more grown-up. But to me, she was still my tiny and adorable little sister.

And now she was journeying to a distant country. Worse, only a single person was accompanying her, despite her inability to defend herself. The worry that I was feeling almost drove me insane.

"Don't go anywhere," I'd almost said. And more than once, I'd almost told her, "I want you to stay here where I can reach you."

But I couldn't. I didn't have it in me to say those things.

"I leave tomorrow morning," she'd said, and although I could see in her eyes that she was nervous, I couldn't spot even a hint of doubt—she obviously felt secure in her decision and the path ahead.

Obstructing her will would do me no good. This was a step forward for her and I didn't want to hinder that. Rather than be overprotective and smother her, I'd needed to simply act like an understanding older brother and see her

off. As a result, my imagination had been plagued by every kind of dreadful wrong that could befall her, and these swirling thoughts had kept me up all night, burdening me with those bags beneath my eyes.

No wonder I was sighing at my own wretched state.

“Right.” I glanced down and shook my head once. I had much to do, and I couldn’t wallow in self-pity forever. *Let me get my head straight and start some work.*

I approached the table to gather some documents I’d brought back to my room. My hand reached out to pick them up, but I stopped, waited for a moment, and instead grabbed the book beside them. I cracked open the book and found a piece of paper nestled between the pages, which I’d hurriedly placed there when my sister had arrived the night before.

It had been folded over twice. I opened it and saw the neat handwriting on the page which belonged to my little brother—it was a letter, just like the others I’d gotten from him at regular intervals since his departure to study abroad. However, unlike the personal letters that arrived for Rosemary, which were sprinkled with seasonal greetings, this letter was unmistakably a report. He usually spaced his reports apart by a month, but this one had arrived very shortly after the previous one. Clearly, he had information to convey which he considered urgent.

The letter revealed that the first princess of Lapter would be traveling to Vint. To study, Lapter claimed officially, although I expected that it had more to do with the first prince of Vint. Lapter had exhausted all means of bolstering diplomatic relations with Vint, and at long last, they’d finally offered up their own princess. Marital ties were a simple yet effective method of uniting two countries.

It was still unclear how Vint would react. However, we couldn’t simply wait for their response; Vint might have an alliance with Nevel, but we needed to nip any uncertainties in the bud.

The king would take action, and his measures would likely include marrying Rose to Vint’s crown prince. I wasn’t certain of that yet, but if the king decided it, then Rose would have no right to refuse.

I could protect her from it, but that wouldn't do. Not only would my intervention shatter her future, but it would also fail to solve any of the fundamental problems. The only way to change the situation was for Rose to change it herself. It seemed like an unfair position for a princess so young, but nothing less than wholehearted determination could hope to sway my father's mind.

If she could demonstrate through her achievements, offer enough potential...then she might be able to convince the king that she'd be wasted on a diplomatic marriage. And then—

Two knocks at my door snapped me out of my thoughts.

I slid the letter back inside the book and replaced it on the shelf. Then I picked up the documents I'd initially been after and walked over to the door.

Leonhart was waiting outside. "Good morning."

I returned his greeting. "Morning." My eyes widened a little when I saw his face.

I was surprised to find the same bags under Leonhart's almond eyes that I'd seen under my own in the mirror. There were dark splotches beneath Leonhart's gaze, although they were so faint that I might've missed them had I not looked closely. He wasn't as frail as I was, so I couldn't imagine a mere day or two of missed sleep having this effect on him.

"Leonhart."

"Yes?"

"Busy, are you?" I asked after rubbing beneath my own eyes with my index finger.

He smiled wryly, appearing to have understood what I was referring to. "I'm afraid to say that attending to personal matters has caused a backlog of work."

Hearing that, my eyes widened once again. It was unthinkable for Leonhart to prioritize his personal business and neglect his duties. Certainly, his post as the captain of the royal guard would carry with it an enormous amount of work to do, but Leonhart could handle it all without breaking a sweat.

Unless something out of the ordinary has happened... Suddenly, I remembered what day it was today.

“Did she set off all right?”

There was a pause before Leonhart nodded. “Yes.” He looked embarrassed, like a child caught up to no good, which was a departure from his usual unflinching composure.

My hunch had been correct. I understood what personal business Leonhart had wanted to put first, even at the cost of having to work through the night—he’d gone to see Rose off. I couldn’t think of a parting gift that she’d welcome more than that.

Congratulations, Rose, I thought while picturing my sister, who was by now sailing across the ocean. I was still worried about what awaited her during the journey, but knowing that she was smiling at the moment of her departure warmed my heart somewhat.

Come back to me safe and sound, as soon as you can.

That’s the eternal wish of your feckless older brother.

The Reincarnated Princess Mingles

I peeled the skin from the potatoes and scooped out the eyes with the claw of the peeler. As I repeated this monotonous task, I felt like I was being watched. When I raised my head, my eyes met Paul's. I was confused, unsure of why he was staring so hard at me.

Am I peeling wrong?

"You've clearly done this before," he whispered in amazement, cupping his jaw with a hand. "Who would've guessed?"

What, that's why he's staring? I'm disappointed that he thought I'd volunteer myself for a task I couldn't complete.

I must've let my irritation show in my expression because Paul began to frantically wave his hands in front of his face. "Don't get me wrong, I didn't think that you *couldn't* do it... I just never expected you'd be so good at it."

"Because I'm a child?"

"No. A lot of girls your age have experience helping their mothers, partly to prepare them for their own married lives. No, I just had you pegged as a girl from a rich family."

My body jumped like I'd been zapped by an electric current.

Though my reaction ought to have given everything away, Paul didn't seem to pay it much mind. "But sorry," he said, "guess I was wrong about that." He let out a carefree laugh.

"Wh-Wh-Why did you think I came from a rich family?" I asked, trying to act composed while placing a hand on my fast-beating heart.

I'd based my outfit and hairstyle on the fashion of the city girls, and I'd taken care to prevent my speech from sounding too formal. Although, that last detail had been quite easy since my inner nature had always been rougher anyway.

"Your gestures and the faces you make, they look... Argh, what's the word...?"

Refined! The way you stand too.”

Nobody had ever described me using the word “refined.” I felt happy, but I internally warned myself that I could savor the feeling later. I needed to know what had given me away.

“What else... You have pretty hands. That gave me the impression of a noble girl who’d never had to scrub a pot before.”

My hands?! It was my hands! I felt like cradling my head in said hands. He’d specified a point that had been nowhere on my radar...

He *was* right in assuming that I spent little time washing up. I’d clean up after myself whenever I’d take over the palace kitchens for a change of pace, but that was once or twice a month at most. I also watered the plants and played with the dirt in the greenhouse, but not enough to blemish my hands. And, in the unlikely event that my hands did become chapped, they’d soon be rejuvenated thanks to some skin-care treatments from the skilled palace maids.

“But a noble girl wouldn’t know how to peel a potato to save her life.” Paul roared with laughter and dismissed the matter, but I could feel my face becoming fraught.

“I never would’ve guessed that our adorable visitor would prove to be such a valuable asset to us,” Kurt said with a sparkle in his eye. He pinched some of the potato skins that I’d peeled and held them up. “Look at how thin these peels are! She’s an artist.”

I smiled at the compliment, but internally I was still freaking out. *Oh God, it feels like any little thing could blow my cover. What if there’s a problem with how thinly I’m peeling the potatoes? Do people’s upbringings show in how they use a kitchen knife? Uh-oh, I need to stop thinking or I’m gonna throw up.*

I don’t like owing Klaus favors, but I’ll take any help I can get right now. Save me, Klaus! I looked over my shoulder, hoping that he’d sort out the situation, but I instead found him smiling and nodding at Kurt.

Hope deserted me.

Why’s he acting like an old man who’s just been praised for his granddaughter?!

Klaus puffed his chest out with pride, and I felt like killing him. *This isn't the time! Have a little think about the situation we're in, please!*

I prayed with all my heart for someone to change the conversation, while also shooting daggers at my guard for failing to recognize what I wanted, but at that exact moment...the kitchen door opened and Jan returned, carrying a bunch of foodstuffs in one hand.

"Quit slacking, guys!" Jan barked disapprovingly. "You gonna make the girl do *all* the work?"

Paul and Kurt resumed their tasks at once. Paul was nominally in charge of the kitchen, but it seemed that the actual power was held by someone else.

Well, whatever the case, it worked out for me—the topic got dropped.
Relieved, I wiped the sweat from my brow.

Then, a woman's voice called out to me, and my eyes grew round.

"Mary!"

"Huh?"

"So this is where you were," said the woman. "No wonder I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Bianca!" I exclaimed.

Big Sis Bianca followed Jan into the kitchen. Apparently, they'd run into each other while Jan was returning from the storage room, and he'd led her here after learning that she was looking for me.

"I was getting worried," she said. "It was like you'd vanished from the ship."

"S-Sorry about that."

"Oh, no need to apologize," Bianca said, smiling. "I wasn't looking for you because I needed you, I just wanted to see you. And I have myself to blame for taking so long to get changed."

Her clothing was indeed different from what she'd been wearing when we'd boarded. Before, she'd been dressed in a trim, dark-blue dress, but now she wore a hempen shirt with a dark-brown gilet, black pants, and black boots.

She'd tied her long, wavy black hair at her neck.

"You're dressed like..." I started.

She was clearly dressed as a man. Seeing a beautiful young woman in men's clothing seemed jarring at first glance, but *something* about it was...

"How do I look?" she asked.

My true thoughts slipped out. "Fabulous."

In fact, it scared me how much I liked her look. *Hidden World's* images had never showcased Big Sis Bianca dressed as a man, but she looked so dignified and handsome now... I felt like doors were opening for me that I never knew existed.

The corners of her glossy lips curved upward. "Thank you. Hearing you say it makes me happier than anything else."

Her enchanting grin caused me to flinch. However, I soon lost sight of her smile—it had become hidden behind Klaus's back after he'd stepped between us.

Bianca's voice became deep and firm. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What do you mean?" Klaus responded, just as firmly.

The room felt a degree or two chillier than it had been. I rubbed my arms together for warmth.

"Would you mind not stepping between us?" Bianca complained. "You're in the way."

"Who asked you to come here? Oh, that's right—nobody," Klaus rebutted. "So don't act like you get to set the terms around here, and instead, reconsider who's really in whose way."

"You're saying it's me?" Bianca asked.

"This is the kitchen," said Klaus. "It's not a home for layabouts to lounge around."

"*You're one to talk,*" I wanted to quip, but decided against it. Klaus had wanted to help, and I'd been the one to stop him. However, the right to make

comments like that should be reserved for people that do more than just watch me work.

Bianca sniffed before boldly declaring, “Well then, I’ll help out!”

Bianca pushed past Klaus and approached me. “What are you doing, Mary? Peeling potatoes?” She looked down at my hands, picked up one of the potatoes, and then turned her eyes toward Paul and the other kitchen workers. “Do you mind if I join in?”

Paul had been observing Klaus and Bianca’s exchange in stunned silence, but he now hurriedly agreed. “S-Sure. We, uh, wouldn’t turn down such a gorgeous woman.”

Bianca pulled up a nearby chair and sat on it, apparently unfazed by the nervous look of Paul’s smile. “Cooking isn’t my strong suit, but I’ll try my best. We’ll do it together, Mary.”

Big Sis Bianca has so much self-confidence and an all-encompassing skill set to back it up, and yet she’s still so humble, I thought. How naive I was.

It’d been a mere three seconds after we’d sat down to work, facing each other over the top of the bucket for discarding the peels... My jaw dropped at the loud *thunk* that I heard. I looked down inside of the bucket and saw half of a potato rolling around the bottom.

Her hand probably slipped and she chopped that off by accident, I judged. Next, however, one-quarter of a potato flew into the bucket before my eyes. I’d reached down to select another potato, but my hand and my thoughts both came to a halt.

That’s strange. I could’ve sworn that she asked me whether we were peeling potatoes. Maybe I misheard her, and she actually asked if we were dicing potatoes...

Thunk. While I was trying to deny reality, one-eighth of a potato joined the rest in the bucket.

“B-Bianca?!” I cried.

“Hmmm?” In stark contrast to the sheer look of desperation on my face,

Bianca merely widened her eyes and tilted her head.

She looks so adorable when she's puzzled. But more importantly... My eyes drifted toward the tiny remnant of potato in her hand. It wasn't so much a peeled potato as a minced one.

"Your potato..." As I searched for the right words to say, another chunk of it fell away.

"That's one peeled," Bianca said proudly, holding a smile on her face and a die-sized potato in her hand.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, but then put on a warm smile. "Bianca, would you let me finish the rest?"

"Huh? Why?"

"I have a burning passion for peeling potatoes," I prattled on while smiling faintly. "You could even call it a hobby of mine. I absolutely adore peeling potatoes, and my love for them is so strong that I can't bear to think about someone else taking the job from me."

So please, sit over there quietly.

It seemed like I'd succeeded in driving her into submission through the zeal of my argument. Bianca nodded, shrinking back.

With my peace of mind restored, I returned to peeling the potatoes.

Bianca's eyes lit up as she watched me at work. "You're amazing, Mary," she said. "Your peels are so thin. And you're quick too. You'll make a good wife one day."

"D-Do you think so?" I blushed and pointed my head down, embarrassed by the direct compliment. Upon hearing the words "good wife," my head immediately conjured up an image of me and Sir Leonhart standing together in a kitchen. *Yeah, cringey, I know.*

I shook my head a little to drive out the delusion.

"You really are amazing," Bianca said. "I can't believe you've peeled all of these by yourself."

“She had to, since a certain somebody proved to be nothing but a hindrance,” Klaus grumbled.

“Are you referring to the man with the fishy smile who looks nothing like his cute little sister?”

“No, I’m referring to the woman who’s acting far too friendly with my cute little sister.”

As it happened, there was no need for me to drive the comfy delusion from my head myself. The nasty argument between two people smiling so prettily at each other did that for me. Bianca and Klaus’s exchange was so frosty that I feared I’d catch my death, like Nello in *A Dog of Flanders*.

Oh, Patrasche, it feels so cold here...

“If you’re not being useful, then why not go above deck and admire the sea?” suggested Klaus.

“I don’t see you helping out either. How about *you* go and admire the sea? You’ll find a cute girl up there, so why not make friends with her?”

“I’ll leave that to you. She’s pretty, on the outside at least, so I’m sure you’d get along famously.”

Oh God, I can’t raise my head. I cowered, afraid of becoming collateral damage in the war of words raging above my head. *Neither of you is doing anything valuable here. In fact, you’re like peas in a pod. It’s not exactly commendable trying to fob Flora off on each other either; she has nothing to do with this. Here’s an idea—why don’t you both go admire the sea together?*

A swarm of retorts flew through my mind, but I let none of them pass my lips. I didn’t want the conversational dodgeball to strike me.

“The only cute girl I wanna get to know is right here,” Bianca said. “Right?” she asked, bringing me into the conversation.

I flinched.

“Stop leering at my little sister,” Klaus said. “Come here, Mary.”

Leave me out of this, I’m begging you. I turned my now-hollow eyes toward Paul and the other sailors, who were watching the exchange from a safe

distance. They looked away as soon as I made eye contact.

Oh, no. They've abandoned me to my fate. Makes sense though. Everyone has to worry about saving their own neck.

While I was staring into the distance and chuckling to myself, trying to mentally detach from the scene, there came a knock at the door.

Kurt was closest to the entrance. "Hello?" he replied.

The door opened and a tall man entered. He had ash-gray hair cut short and light-brown skin. A shrewd sparkle shone in his honey-colored almond eyes, and an old scar was visible near his right eye. I noticed similar scars on the portion of his muscly chest that poked through the collar of his black shirt. He appeared to be in his late twenties.

He had handsome facial features, but something about him made him seem unapproachable. He didn't look like a sailor or a merchant. *Maybe he's a soldier, I thought, or an adventurer... Or perhaps he's a mercenary hired to protect the ship.*

He swept the room with his eyes. When they met my own, I flinched.

"My, aren't you cute?" the man remarked after a long and intense look at me.

A stupid-sounding voice emerged from my throat. "Huh?"

"You're cute, like a little porcelain doll."

The deepness of his voice suited his muscular appearance, but his tone was softer. No, "soft" didn't do it justice, but I was too taken aback to properly analyze it.

"I, um, errr... Thank you?" My intonation crept up toward the end, a manifestation of the question marks flying through my mind.

He put on a slight smile when I cocked my head. "Oooh, even your reactions are cute. I wanna bag you up to take home."

I had to stop myself from instinctively recoiling when he gave me a wink.

Klaus emerged from his dumbstruck state, stopped just standing around, and moved in front of me protectively.

“What do you want with my sister?”

“My, you’re a handsome one too.”

“What do you want?!” In a rare turn of events, it was Klaus that had been taken aback by someone’s behavior.

He’s formidable, this “Misster.” A fierce countenance, but by contrast, kind of effeminate. He might be unbeatable.

Misster was asked once again why he was there, and he clapped his hands together like it’d nearly slipped his mind. “That’s right, I came here for a reason. Mr. Sailor, got any medicine?”

Suddenly finding himself part of the conversation, Kurt jumped. “M-Medicine?”

“You feelin’ rough?” asked Paul. He’d seemed as shaken as Kurt, but he recovered more quickly and straightened out his expression. Maybe that’s the maturity that comes with age.

“It’s not for me,” Misster said. “It’s for a girl. She says she thinks it’s seasickness.”

“I don’t know of any medicines that’ll help with seasickness,” Paul replied.

“Rest is about all you can do,” Kurt piped up. “If she’s suffering, throwing up will make her feel better.”

“Oh dear, that’s not good to hear,” Misster said, placing a hand on his cheek and furrowing his brows. “She looked like she was suffering a great deal.”

I’d been listening to their conversation without saying anything, but after thinking for a moment, I began to scavenge through a pouch that hung from my waist. I stood, moving out from behind Klaus. “E-Excuse me.”

“Hm? Something to say, cutie-pie?” Misster asked.

“C-Cutie-p...? I, er...” I presented the object I’d pulled from my pouch and gave it to Misster.

He cocked his head, mirroring my body language from earlier. “What’s that?”

“It’s a medicinal herb. The effect isn’t strong, but it can help with motion

sickness when you chew on it. You can have it.”

My offering was a set of heavenly bamboo leaves.

By heavenly bamboo, I mean nandina—a plant with red berries and thin leaves, and the one whose leaves are used to make the ears of Japanese snow rabbits.

Its berries combat coughing, but I’d just brought the leaves with me. Nandina leaves had long been passed down as a folk remedy in Japan, and chewing on them was said to relieve motion sickness. However, awareness of their effect appeared to be lacking in this world. That was surely the case because even the sailors seemed unaware of this herb.

“But only give her a little, since it’s poisonous in large quantities,” I said. “Let me know if anyone else needs some.”

I don’t need it for myself anyway.

In my previous life, my semicircular canals had been sensitive, so even short car journeys would give me motion sickness. Luckily, I didn’t seem to suffer from that problem at all anymore—I always felt perfectly fine riding in carriages. I’d brought the medicine along just in case, but I couldn’t sense any onset of seasickness.

Misster stared at me in silence, not even reaching out to take the leaves from my hands.

“Ummm...?” I mumbled.

“Hmmm.” Misster hummed, pushing air through his lips, which arched up into a satisfied grin. “Could you come with me for a minute?”

“Huh?!”

“Come have a look at her symptoms.”

“Oh, but, I’m not a doc—”

He cut me off. “Please.” The forceful and intense look of his smile made me realize what I’d done.

Huh? Don’t tell me... I’ve shot myself in the foot again.

“Ohhh...”

The Reincarnated Princess Nurses

I made countless pleas to Misster, saying that I couldn't help because I wasn't a doctor, but he brushed my arguments aside and refused to be convinced. He walked in front of me, urging me to hurry as I dragged my feet up the stairs.

"Argh." My eyes squinted against the brightness of the sunlight as I emerged above deck. I shielded them with my hands, but to little effect. The afterglow of the sunlight sparkled beneath my closed eyelids, seared into my vision. The deck was hotter than I'd expected, and I immediately regretted leaving my cloak in my cabin.

Klaus looked down worriedly from behind me. "Are you all right?" He tried to pull me inside his own cloak, but I shot that offer down.

"I'm fine."

"Your fair skin will burn," said Bianca, seeming concerned as she lined up next to me.

"So will yours!" She wasn't wearing a cloak either. My warning had been laced with panic because it would be a travesty for sunburns to ravage Bianca's snow-white skin.

"Don't worry about me." She smiled, entirely unconcerned.

I guess she's got a lax attitude when it comes to herself.

Misster beckoned us, motioning with his hand. "Over here." For some reason, he was hiding behind a pillar.

We joined him behind the cover of the pillar. I looked in the direction he was pointing and found Flora's group.

Klaus groaned quietly. "*Her* again," he muttered with disdain.

I'd prefer to stay away from her too, but she might be the one who's ill, I thought. I examined her appearance.

Flora was reclining on a deck chair, enjoying some comforting shade from a

parasol, which was held by her chamberlain. Her strawberry-blonde hair bounced gently with each swipe of the large fan in her hands. She was the picture of a celebrity on a pleasure cruise, and I didn't see any signs of ill-health...at least, none that showed in her complexion or facial expression.

"She seems comfortable enough..." I said, tilting my head.

"Not her, silly," Misster said. "Next to her."

Next to her?

Misster put his hands on my cheeks and swiveled my head.

My field of vision shifted a little to the right, and...there! A maid standing a short distance away from Flora. The maid was standing up straight and wearing a dark-gray, high-necked dress. She also didn't have a parasol to shield her from the scorching sunlight. Even this far away, I could tell that her complexion wasn't great. Every so often, she pressed a hand against her mouth or her forehead.

"Oh, you meant the maid?" I said. "She does look pallid."

"Right?" Misster agreed. "But she won't listen when I tell her to take a break."

She probably couldn't, even if she wanted to, I thought, glancing back at her mistress, who was relaxing blissfully.

"At any rate, we need to at least hydrate her," I said. "I'll go back to the kitchen and—"

"Excuse me, Mia!"

"Y-Yes, Lady Flora."

I'd been about to say, *"I'll go back to the kitchen and fetch some water,"* but a certain chagrined voice cut me off.

The maid called Mia grew tense.

"You're daydreaming," Flora said.

"I'm... No, I'm..."

"You can't keep still and you're tottering. And I *know* I heard you yawning a minute ago."

“My apologies... I didn’t get much sleep last night since the preparations for this journey took so long...”

“Spare me the excuses!” Flora barked.

Mia’s shoulders twitched. “Understood!”

“This is terrible...” Bianca said, frowning.

“I’d like to get her to take a break, whether she wants one or not, but she has to save face in front of that mistress of hers. What should we do, cutie-pie?” Misster addressed his question to me. His lighthearted tone stood in contrast to the bitter look on his face.

“The situation might be too dire to spend time worrying about that,” I replied.

“What do you mean, Mary?” Klaus asked.

I opened my mouth to answer but hesitated.

Anyone with the general knowledge available in modern Japan would understand: it was dangerous to be dehydrated and have no cover from the scorching sun. Add that to her poor condition due to lack of sleep, and it was a recipe for heatstroke.

But I wasn’t sure whether heatstroke was a recognized condition in this world, or how to explain it. Well actually, explaining would take more time than we had.

Sweat drenched Mia’s forehead, but despite that, her face was pale. In addition, I suspected that she felt nauseous and had a headache, which I judged from the way that she kept covering her mouth and holding her hand against her forehead. Misster’s suggestion that Mia was suffering from seasickness was plausible. However, if these symptoms were instead caused by heatstroke, then she was in danger. We needed to act, and fast.

“Big Brother.”

“What?”

“Could you bring me some water from the kitchen?” I requested, looking up at him.

Klaus's eyes shot wide open. He said nothing for a few seconds, probably anxious about leaving my side. However, his answer wasn't "no." With a serious look in his eyes, he asked me, "That's what you need?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"Got it."

Though surprised by the ease with which he accepted, I added a few more items to my order. "Add a pinch of salt and sugar to the lemon water we took down earlier. Fill a bucket with water as well... And bring me some towels."

"Lemon water with sugar and salt, a bucket of water, and towels? Okay." Klaus went to leave, but he came to a halt and turned back around. "I'll be quick, so you be..." His words trailed off before he finished his warning. "What am I saying... 'Careful' isn't in your vocabulary."

He gave a reserved smile and I returned it.

"Sorry," I said. *My humblest apologies for not being the easiest person to guard, but ignoring someone right in front of me who's ill—that's just not an option.*

"Let me rephrase that," Klaus said. "Please *try* to be as careful as you can."

"I will. Thank you."

Listening to the diminishing sound of Klaus's footsteps, I inhaled a deep breath and braced myself.

Now then...how to break the ice? I set off walking toward Mia, followed by Bianca and Misster.

Flora shot us a suspicious look when she noticed our presence. However, her gaze grew more hostile when she realized that *I* was the one approaching.

"What do *you* want? Didn't you get the message last time?" She glared at me, and I faltered for a moment.

Seems she isn't fond of me at all...

"I need to speak with you about something," I said.

She gave me the cold shoulder. "I don't. Scram."

After receiving a curt dismissal from Flora, I glanced over at Mia. Her face was pale, and she was hunched over, still covering her mouth. I knew that I shouldn't make waves, but at this rate, she'd run out of time.

"Please listen to me," I said. "We need to act with urgency."

"You don't know when to stop!"

I eventually managed to communicate my request over the top of Flora's objections. "Your companion appears to be ill. Will you let me treat her?"

Flora raised one eyebrow in bafflement. "What?" She looked at me and Mia in turn. "You mean Mia? Leave her be. She just hasn't slept well."

"Lack of sleep might not sound that bad, but if she's been standing in this heat without even a parasol, she could collapse. At least let me take her into the shade—"

"Can't you hear me?! I'm telling you to leave her be!"

Flora wasn't budging, and I was beginning to get irritated. *Oh, for God's sake! What do I have to do to make you understand?!*

"You tried, cutie-pie." After listening to Flora and me talking in circles, Misster smiled wryly and turned to face Mia. "This is only going to get worse, so let's just grab her and take her away."

Mia was staring at the floor, blank eyed. When she saw Misster reaching his hand out toward her, she snapped out of her daze and her head flung up. "N-No! I'm perfectly all right! Please don't mind—"

"*Me*," she would've finished, but her body swayed. She tumbled, and Misster caught her in his muscly arms.

"We *tried* to tell you!" Misster complained, scooping Mia up. "Hey, you! Out of my way!" he commanded the chamberlain, who was frozen dumbstruck to the spot. Misster took off, running away from the group.

I hurriedly followed after him. "Excuse me, coming through! Ah! Let me have that!" I borrowed a fan from the chamberlain as I passed by him.

"S-Sure," the chamberlain sputtered.

“Where do we take her, cutie-pie?!” asked Misster.

“We’ll ask to borrow the room nearest to the entrance! Where are the...”

“Hey, miss! Over here!” Just as I was looking around for the sailors, a voice called out to me. The crew working on deck had apparently witnessed the events, and they immediately volunteered to guide us.

We descended the stairs and entered the room closest to the stairwell.

“Bianca, when my brother comes, can you send him here?” I requested, looking at her over my shoulder.

“Will do.”

Misster laid Mia gently onto the bed and then asked me for instructions.

“What next?”

I took a deep breath to ease my panicked mind.

No textbooks or doctors here to guide me, just my own knowledge. Come on, Rose, remember. What’s the first thing you do when giving medical aid to someone with heatstroke?

“We should loosen her clothing and cool her body down.”

Misster took a look at Mia, paused in thought for a moment, and then said, “I’d better go then. Can you handle the rest?”

Despite his own apparent femininity, Misster was considerate in recognizing that Mia likely wouldn’t want a man to see her undressed.

“I can.”

Hearing my confirmation, Misster stood up. “I’ll leave it to you,” he said, patting me on the shoulder before exiting the room.

Bianca and Klaus entered as he left.

“We’re here, Mary!” said Bianca.

“Here’s the water,” Klaus added.

“Thank you. Wait outside, Big Brother. Will you help me, Bianca?”

“Of course I will. What do you want me to do?”

“Her legs need to be raised.”

“Got it.”

I unbuttoned her blouse and exposed her chest. After parting her bangs, I placed one damp towel on her forehead, then two more on her neck and just above her chest. I then waved the fan to cool her.

Bianca folded some sheets and rested Mia’s legs on top of them.

I hope this lowers her body temperature, at least a little...

“Now we just wait and keep an eye on her?” Bianca asked.

“Let me think...”

While fanning Mia, I considered what I should do. *What if she doesn’t regain consciousness? I’d feel awful stripping an unmarried girl naked, but I figured that we’d better cool down her armpits and thighs. We don’t have any ice though, so it won’t have much effect... What I wouldn’t give to have Lutz here.*

The instant I thought of his name, I remembered the amulet that he’d given me. I touched the outside of the pouch that hung from my waist.

“Mary!” Bianca called my name as I was running my fingers along the hard object through the fabric of the pouch.

I followed Bianca’s gaze and turned my eyes toward Mia. “Huh?”

Her long eyelashes quivered, signaling that she was waking up. As her forehead scrunched up, a murmur escaped her lips. “Ugh...” As we watched, her eyes slowly opened.

“Mia!” I cried.

Her eyeballs swiveled back and forth as if seeking the owner of the voice that’d called to her. She looked first at the ceiling, then at Bianca, and finally at me, before blinking several times. Her eyes looked less vacant and slightly more vibrant than before.

“Where...am I?” she asked feebly.

I felt sorry for her when I heard her terribly croaky voice, but at any rate, she appeared to be lucid.

I exhaled a long sigh of relief. “This is the cabin closest to the stairs.”

She began to say something. “What? I—”

I held my hand up, gesturing for her to stop. “We’ll talk later. You need to have some water first. Can you sit up?”

She nodded.

I helped her upright, then poured water into a glass. With Bianca’s assistance, Mia took a sip of the water. Her eyes widened a little. She sat motionless for a few seconds and then tipped the glass back, drinking the water in large gulps.

“Not so fast...” I watched her nervously, worried that she might choke.

The glass might’ve only been half-full, but it was still a lot of water. She guzzled it down in an instant. When she held the glass toward me for a refill, I obliged.

When Mia had finally drunk half of the water that Klaus had brought, she finally appeared to be satisfied. She exhaled heavily.

“This is delicious...”

So she really was on the verge of dehydration.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said, smiling at her.

Mia’s eyes flitted between me and the glass. “What is this? It tastes so good.”

At that point, I remembered that the drink wasn’t just ordinary water. “It’s lemon water with a pinch of salt and sugar added.” *Those few ingredients were enough to serve up a quick and easy energy drink. Just what the doctor ordered for heatstroke. Super simple to make, and yet, surprisingly tasty.*

“You can get *this* taste from just that? Wow. It’s so good.” Mia repeated these words of praise to herself while staring at the glass in her hands.

I smiled at her. “I’m glad you’ve perked up a bit.”

Her head bounced up. “That’s right, why am I... Did I...collapse?”

“You did,” Bianca answered. “You lost consciousness in the middle of our conversation.”

Upon hearing that, Mia blanched. Perhaps subconsciously, her fingers gripped the bedsheets with such force that her knuckles turned white. “Oh no, Lady Flora will—” Mia tried to jump to her feet, but she hadn’t fully recovered. “Argh!” she cried as she teetered.

“Careful!” Bianca exclaimed, propping her up on the bed. Mia only escaped falling thanks to Bianca’s quick reaction.

That was close, I thought. My heart was in my mouth. “No sudden movements,” I said, trying to calm her down, but she wouldn’t listen.

“I can’t just decide to rest...not without Lady Flora’s permission.”

Bianca frowned with evident exasperation. “Her permission? You *collapsed*. That’s not your fault!”

Bianca’s argument was sensible, but Mia wouldn’t be able to accept that logic. If she could have, then she would’ve asked for help *before* she collapsed.

My brows furrowed while watching Mia’s reaction, which shed light on her working conditions. I vented my frustration in a sigh and massaged my forehead with my fingers. “Mia, if you go back to work as you are now, you’ll just collapse again.”

“But—”

“And collapsing again would defeat the entire purpose of going back. So you’re better off taking a little bit of time to rest and recuperate.” I looked into her eyes and asked, “Am I wrong?”

Mia’s head dropped like a scolded child, and she mumbled, “No.”

After Mia deflated, Bianca and I glanced at each other and exchanged wan smiles.

“Right. So take a bit of time to rest yourself up.” I grabbed the glass from her hands and instructed her to lie back down on the bed.

She obediently did what I asked.

I lifted the duvet up to her shoulders and gave it a few pats. Her body must’ve been craving sleep since, before long, she began to doze off. Her eyelids started to fall, but they stopped as if she’d thought of something, then opened once

more.

I noticed that her wandering gaze was directed at me, so I leaned my head a smidge to one side, encouraging her to speak.

Her lips moved, slowly forming the words, “Thank you for saving me.”

My eyes widened in astonishment, but Mia didn’t seem to notice and promptly fell asleep, having apparently said all that she wanted to. Her breathing entered the gentle rhythm of slumber.

I placed a damp cloth on her forehead and whispered, “You’re welcome.”

The Reincarnated Princess Engages in Idle Conversation

After Mia fell asleep, I left her to Bianca and stepped outside the cabin, whereupon I was swarmed by people. Misster and Klaus were, of course, among the crowd filling the narrow hall—they'd been joined by the sailor that'd led us here and even Paul.

"How's she doing?" Misster asked.

Klaus had the same query. "Is she all right?"

"She's sleeping at the moment, so *shhh*." I placed my index finger against my lips to hush them.

Everyone simultaneously fell silent. The sight of a man as large as Paul covering his mouth with both hands was, I admit, a little cute.

We moved a short distance from the doorway, and I began explaining the situation to everyone gathered. I informed them that Mia had contracted a mild case of dehydration caused by the heat and poor sleep. I also told them that she'd regained consciousness for a while and had drunk some water, but that she'd need more rest since she still looked pale.

"So she's not in critical condition?" Misster asked.

"I'm not a doctor so I can't guarantee that, but I expect so. The only treatment left is for her to get plenty of sleep. If she does, I think she should recover."

"Right," Misster said, breathing a sigh of relief.

The sailors seemed less tense now as well. With nothing left to do, those gathered began to disperse, returning to their posts.

"Excuse me!" I called out to the sailor that'd shown us to the cabin, catching him before he left.

“Hmm? What’s up, miss?”

“I’d prefer not to move Mia around too much, so I was hoping that we could continue to borrow that cabin, if possible...”

“Oh, just that? Sure, it’s fine.”

“But there’s already someone who’s supposed to be staying in that room, isn’t there?” After all, there was a complete set of bedding in the cabin, the space was clean and tidy, and the air wasn’t stuffy. I wouldn’t expect to find all of that in a vacant room. “Or am I mistaken?” I asked.

The sailor shook his head. “You’re right. A passenger was allocated that room, but I’ve already asked his permission.”

“You have? Thank you very much.”

“Don’t sweat it. He didn’t need any convincing anyway.”

I should thank him as well, I decided, and I asked the sailor where I could find him.

“While you’re at it,” the sailor said, clapping a fist into the palm of one hand, “he says he has some luggage in that cabin. Could you do me a favor? Fetch it and drop it off to him.”

“I will.” *Sure. It’s hardly a big ask.*

I slipped back into the cabin and, taking care not to disturb Mia’s sleep, began to look for the man’s luggage. After picking up a cloth bag that’d been placed out of the way in the corner of the room, I returned to the sailor.

He led me back up above deck. Flora was nowhere to be seen.

Has she gone back to her cabin? Works for me, to be honest. No fights this way.

“Ah! Found him,” the sailor said. “Hey, mister!” he called with an easygoing tone of voice and a big wave of his hand.

The target of the sailor’s attention was situated at the stern of the ship. He wore a dark-gray cloak and had pulled the hood low, obscuring his face. If I were to believe the sailor’s description, he was actually a young man, but I

couldn't judge his gender let alone his age since every bit of his skin was hidden beneath the cloak.

"This girl here brought your things," the sailor said, indicating me with his thumb.

I gave a slight nod in greeting and then looked up at the hooded person.

Now that I was standing close to him, I became more confident that he was indeed a man. His height probably surpassed one hundred and eighty centimeters. Tall women do exist, but I noticed that he also had the shoulders and frame of a man. However, even from my vantage point far below his eyeline, I still couldn't see his face.

I thanked him as I handed over his luggage. "Thank you for changing cabins for us."

The man shook his head as if to say, "*Don't mention it.*" He didn't utter a word out loud though.

Not very talkative, I see. But then, George's letter sprang into my mind. On that note...I wonder if the Khuer—the tribe of medicine makers—have the same vibe. Hiding their bodies beneath cloaks and keeping conversation to a minimum... This man certainly checks those boxes.

At that point in my thinking, a bitter smile rose to my lips. I was astounded by my own overly simplistic thought process.

So what, a man from the Khuer tribe just so happens to have boarded the same ship as me? Yeah, right. What are the chances of something that miraculous happening? The chips aren't all just gonna fall in my favor.

And, in and of itself, there's nothing unusual at all about wearing a cloak as protection from the sun.

I concluded that he was just on the reticent side and said my farewells.

A sailor entered the kitchen to deliver some goods. When he saw me, he smiled broadly and patted my head. "Ah, miss. So this is where you were."

"Hello," I replied.

“Hello to you too. How’s your voyage going? Anything I can do for you?”

Starting with Paul, the kitchen staff sighed. The words “not this again” might as well have been written on their faces.

“Get out if you’re just here to loiter,” Paul grouched, flapping his hands as though he were shooing away an insect. “We can’t move for people.”

He was right. At the moment, the kitchen housed the three members of the kitchen crew, as well as two volunteers—Misster and myself. I’d sent Klaus outside to free up space; I’d told Bianca not to come. She’d taken that news a little...no, *very* badly.

“All right then,” the sailor said. “Miss, this old man would like to ask you to join him on deck. Tell you what—just this once, I’ll let you climb the crow’s nest.”

Paul slammed the pot that he’d been holding down onto the counter. “Yeah, you and the two others that said the exact same thing! Get the hell out of here, now!!!” He charged over, put his hands on the sailor’s back, and shoved him out of the kitchen.

I could hear a voice complaining from the other side of the door, but Paul paid it no notice.

Misster, who was sitting opposite me and carrying on with his task, began to tease me. “Look who’s popular, Mary.” The corners of his lips arched upward into a smug smile.

I stopped stringing beans and glared at him. “You’re enjoying this.”

“You bet.” His behavior was entirely devoid of shame, and I knew that he’d won.

Not that I ever thought I could best him in an argument...

Misster saw me pout my lips in irritation and he blinked a few times. He brought his hands up and squeezed my cheeks with his fingers. “Now you’re ugly,” he chuckled.

Today was the day after Mia’s collapse. Misster and I had properly introduced ourselves to each other and had become friends. His name was Wolf Lucker.

He'd told me that he was twenty-seven years old and single.

Turns out that he was extremely sociable, proving my initial impression of him as an unapproachable person to be unfounded. He was both a good listener and a good talker, and I loved our conversations because we shared a hobby in cooking. After no time at all, we were as thick as thieves.

"You should be happy," Wolf said, narrowing his eyes. His handsomely wild features took on a more mellow appearance. "It means that you're loved."

I sensed a charm that was androgynous, neither male nor female, in his downturned eyes. *It's strange. The rest of his body looks so manly.*

"I don't recall doing anything to earn that love," I countered.

"What are you saying? The whole ship knows that you helped the maid girl."

"That's between me and her, not them."

Mia had made a complete recovery after three hours of restful sleep. She'd thanked us for nursing her, but I'd been driven crazy by the thought that Flora might inflict punishment on her. However, my fears didn't come to pass—Flora didn't punish Mia, nor did she quarrel with us. She hadn't even stepped one foot out of her cabin.

I'd found Flora's sudden docility peculiar, but Wolf had suggested that the icy looks she'd gotten from the crew and the other passengers had sapped her of the will to show her face.

Whatever the real reason, I'm glad I won't have to get into any pointless squabbles.

"It's not just the maid," Wolf added. "You're the ship doctor now."

"Please don't..." I muttered wearily, pressing my palm against my forehead.

After the incident, more and more people had started coming up to me and complaining about pains or asking about suggestions for medicines. Although I'd insisted each time that I wasn't a doctor, I hadn't managed to get anyone to take notice.

"I *keep* telling them that I'm not a doctor."

“Who’d believe you when you have an encyclopedic knowledge of medicines and illnesses?”

I had no response.

If I felt like a person’s illness was potentially severe, I’d advise them to have a genuine examination by an actual doctor. But when it came to small cuts or bruises, I’d brought the right medicines on board the ship with me, so I’d just hand them over.

You reap what you sow, and I was most definitely reaping now.

I never thought that my custom medicine set and the knowledge that Miss Irene had drilled into my brain would work against me...

I was warming up to the idea of saying “screw it” and updating my cover story to include a doctor among my relatives.

“The Kingdom of Nevel really is an amazing place,” Wolf remarked.

What’s Nevel got to do with anything? I cocked my head, puzzled by the sudden change of topic.

My confusion must’ve shown on my face since Wolf stopped working and began to explain. “It’s amazing that little girls like you have access to education about medicine. Once you visit another country, you’ll realize how privileged your world is.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Most countries don’t see the point of giving women a scholastic education. Few parents would go to the trouble of teaching their daughters about medicine. They must believe that a wedding dress and a home to look after are the only things that make girls happy.”

That trend probably persisted in Nevel, as it had in Middle Ages Europe and the Japan of old. Hearing it mentioned, I realized that it might be a rarity for a princess like me to receive a broad education in subjects such as astronomy, medicine, linguistics, and history, rather than just the usual embroidery and arithmetic.

“Including Nevel,” Wolf continued, “there are only a handful of countries that

have important posts filled by women. Even Flanmer's matriarchal society is now a thing of the past."

Wolf was correct. Flanmer retained the veneer of a matrilineal society, but it was a thin one now. The right of succession was inherited by women, but all practical power belonged to their husbands, the kings. Their social form resembled ancient Egypt's; it was polygynous, meaning that the king could keep multiple wives. The current queen was beloved by her people and her rule was stable, but the standards for royalty and commoners were different. I'd heard that there were strong pressures against women entering the workforce.

From a foreigner's perspective, it must be remarkable that Miss Irene holds the title of Head Sorceress, I thought. "Nevel is a privileged country," I murmured.

Wolf gave a big nod of his head. "It is. In its climate and its natural resources. But most of all, in its leadership."

"Its leadership?"

He means my father?

"Yeah. Many wise kings have sat atop Nevel's throne, but it was only after the current one took power that women began to rise to positions of responsibility. He also enabled merit to become the determining factor in assigning posts, not class. The changes haven't completely taken root, but people say that the first prince, who'll be king next, is a sincere and talented boy, so the future's bright."

To be honest, it didn't feel like we were *actually* discussing my own father and brother.

"Are they really so amazing?" I asked.

"Hmm, you say that like it's none of your business."

For a moment I failed to comprehend what he'd said, but after a short delay, my head bounced up. "What?" *What did he just say? Like it's none of my business? So he knows that it is my business?* I fixed my eyes on Wolf. Cold sweat trickled down my spine and my nerves were at their limit.

However, Wolf only tilted his head a little, appearing not to have noticed my

trepidation. “Well, you’re from Nevel, aren’t you? Everyone knows how popular the royal family is with Nevel’s subjects.”

“Huh? Ah! Aaah, that’s what you...” I almost slouched over as the tension drained from my body. My stiff muscles relaxed and I exhaled a sigh.

“Weirdo,” Wolf teased, bemused by my unusual antics.

“Nevel has more to boast about than just the king and the first prince,” Paul butted in. He must’ve been listening to my conversation with Wolf. Paul leaned toward us while stirring a pot. “The second prince, Johan, is studying in a neighboring country at the moment, and he’s a fine one too. I hear he’s friendly, and the people of Vint love him as much as his own subjects do.”

“Oh, really?” commented Wolf.

“Yep,” answered Paul. “And there’s Rosemary, the first princess.”

I was staring at the floor, but when I heard that, I froze.

I deserve praise for not squealing. Every part of me wants to run away screaming. I don’t want to hear what they think of me!

“Not many have seen her in person,” Paul continued, “but those that have say she’s inherited the queen’s beauty.”

“From the portraits I’ve seen of the king and queen, I’d be more surprised if that couple gave birth to an ugly child,” Wolf replied.

“Well, sure,” Paul conceded. “But that’s not all. She’s supposedly a kindhearted person too.”

“Be wary of rumors,” Wolf said.

Paul raised one eyebrow in a deft motion. “What?” he asked in an unhappy tone of voice.

Wolf sported a fearless smile, undeterred. “I bet that rich girls from wealthy families are all pampered brats with no common sense, brought up having their every selfish whim pandered to. At least, that’s the impression I get after seeing the noble girl who’s on this ship with us.”

“Ah.” Paul scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

Well, he's right about my lack of common sense. I've had my share of selfish whims as well. And I do get pampered... Yep, there's nothing I can contest.

I put on a half smile and thanked my lucky stars that Klaus wasn't here.

The Reincarnated Princess in an Emergency

I lined my herbs along the shelf above my bed and wagged my finger at each of them, taking stock. “I’m starting to run out,” I remarked to myself. The supply of medicines I’d brought with me in case of an emergency had dwindled. *That’s bound to happen when I give them away, I suppose.*

I still had some left to fight seasickness, but I was out of antidiarrheals and medicines for other internal disorders. On the other hand, some of the medicines remained at full stock, like the one that stopped bleeding.

I was checking each individual medicine before placing it back in my pouch. Suddenly though, I felt someone watching me. When I raised my head, my eyes met those of my personal guard, who was staring at me. As always, he didn’t make any attempt to disguise his staring or look away.

Doesn’t it make him feel awkward? I guess it doesn’t. It mustn’t, because otherwise, Klaus would have to give up being Klaus.

“I’m assuming that there’s something you want to say to me,” I stated.

“No,” he replied, “nothing in particular.”

“Bold of you to say that after boring a hole in me with your eyes.” I patted the pouch that I’d put the medicine into and heaved a sigh.

Hearing my response, Klaus widened his eyes and then cupped his chin with a hand in a gesture of thought. “You could say that staring at you is a habit of mine...”

One that needs to be broken this instant. I mean it! Few habits could get on my nerves more.

“And I was thinking something,” he admitted. “I just wasn’t going to say it.”

So that’s why he could answer that he had nothing he wanted to say. It’s hard to tell whether the way he thinks about things is too straightforward or too twisted.

“So? What were you thinking?” I asked, because that’s the sort of thing people do, and not because I had any particular interest in his answer.

“It’s nothing important,” Klaus prefaced. “I was simply thinking that helping others comes as naturally to you as breathing.”

My eyes grew round. “That’s not true.”

“Your inability to recognize your own actions as ‘helping people’ is part of the reason why I came to that conclusion. And your intentions are genuine because you carry on even when you draw the short end of the stick.”

Klaus’s tone wasn’t teasing, nor was it frustrated or disgusted. It was completely flat. Even so, I felt like he was criticizing me, so I argued. “I haven’t drawn the short end of the stick.”

“Countless people had their lives saved by the Dew of the Sea, and the maid had her life saved by ‘Mary,’ but neither of those events will be credited to ‘Your Highness.’”

I gasped as Klaus pierced me with his direct gaze. Wolf and Paul’s conversation replayed in my mind. Their opinion of Rosemary was one of a spoiled princess with no common sense. Some viewed me favorably, but only because I stood in the afterglow of my father’s and brother’s achievements. Their presumptive description of me wasn’t informed by a recognition of my actions, just the fact that I was related to the king and the first prince.

Klaus didn’t mask his feelings beneath comforting words or noncommittal expressions; he presented just the truth, plain and simple.

My head sank. I gripped and crumpled the sheets in my hands.

“But when someone’s in trouble,” he continued, “you can’t leave them be. I’ve come to the realization that this is your defining characteristic.”

“Huh?” A stupid-sounding noise escaped my throat. “That’s all?” I asked, stunned.

He looked at me and then tilted his head as if puzzled. “Yes...?”

I was sure that he’d been about to start lecturing me. I’d even begun to brace for the incoming “be more dexterous, more resourceful.” The expression on

Klaus's face, however, seemed to say that his message was over, and I couldn't sense that he was faking it.

My shoulders slumped. "Right..." *I forgot that Klaus is like this. He surprises me so often with his erratic behavior and wild statements that his actual demeanor slips my mind; in general, he's exceedingly straightforward and honest.*

He'd stated that he "wasn't going to say anything." That hadn't been the commonplace preface that I'd taken it to be but had simply been the truth. And so, Klaus hadn't demanded anything from me, because to him, the conversation was finished.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"No..." I said. But before I could get another word out, the boat shook. "Whoa?!" I exclaimed in alarm. I hadn't been concentrating. My hands raced toward the sheets and grabbed onto them tightly so that I wouldn't fall from the bed.

Klaus reached out his arms out to support me, but the tremor had been mild, so I didn't really need his assistance.

"A tall wave?" I asked.

"Could be," Klaus answered. "The winds are strong today."

They were. In fact, the winds had been strong for the last few days. Moreover, the voyage was proceeding ahead of schedule, although I wasn't sure whether that was down to the winds blowing in the right direction or the skill of the helmsman.

"If this keeps up," I said, "we might arrive in Flanmer in no time at all." Although my semicircular canals were holding up robustly, in my heart I was beginning to pine for dry land. *I hope we do get there earlier. I really fancy a taste of fresh greens.*

The thought naturally brought a smile to my lips, but Klaus's expression, by contrast, was far more serious.

"Klaus?" I called.

“Sailing too fast invites problems of its own.”

What? But it cuts down on the journey time. Isn't that what we want?

“Our course should take us through an area densely packed with islets. At this speed, our passage through that part of the ocean will happen at night.”

“So you’re worried about the ship running aground?”

“That’s not my only concern...” Klaus’s words trailed off.

His uncharacteristic evasiveness unsettled me, and I waited for him to continue.

He glanced at me and appeared to be hesitating about something. “I’ll go and have a quick look up top. I expect that they’ll be reefing the sails to slow us down or enacting other plans to counter that possibility.” As soon as he finished speaking, he walked to the door. He turned around only once, warning me to stay put, and then exited the cabin.

I’d been left behind. “What was all that about...?” I said to myself.

I drew up my mental map and thought over the voyage’s course, which I’d glimpsed before our departure. The islets that Klaus had mentioned were probably from the archipelago located to Flanmer’s south-southwest. This ship would have to pass through that archipelago to reach our destined port. There were many small, uninhabited islands, and I was aware that sailing at night, when visibility was poor, introduced the risk of running aground. However, Klaus’s attitude seemed to suggest that other dangers were present.

Let’s think, what horrors lurk on the open sea...? Storms, lightning, sharks... Ghosts? Maybe not.

“Hmmm...” I hummed softly. I racked my brain but found no answers, so I slumped down onto the bed and shut my eyes.

My peaceful days aboard the ship must’ve dulled my senses. I’d been nervous about leaving my homeland, but only in the beginning. Other than Mia’s bout of dehydration, every passing day had been tranquil. At some point, my sense of danger had waned.

But I should never have forgotten...

The sea was a scary place.

I had far more to fear from men who'd slipped through life's cracks than from ghosts or specters.

And when night fell, that lesson would be learned.

"...dy Ma..."

From far away, I could hear someone speaking.

"Lady Mary."

The deep voice called out to me and hands shook my body, lifting my consciousness from sleep. My eyelids tried to remain shut, drowsiness holding them together tightly, but I managed to force them open.

I saw Klaus. His expression was grave.

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. It was still dark, and the air was cold and humid. Perhaps there was fog outside.

"Kl—"

Klaus's hand covered my mouth before I could say his name. My eyes widened. He brought his lips close to my ear, and his hushed voice whispered, "Quiet."

The harshness of his expression and the firmness of his voice drove all thoughts of sleep from my mind. I made eye contact with him and nodded silently.

He lifted his hand from my mouth. "There was a noise above deck. Please wait here while I investigate what it was."

I didn't know what had caused the noise, and for some reason, I didn't think I wanted to find out. Gnawing on my bottom lip, I felt a sudden, indescribable dread.

Seeing my reaction, Klaus knelt down by the bedside. He cupped my hands in his and placed something onto my palms.

I gasped.

It was a dagger, with a haft of silver and a black sheath, twenty centimeters long and mostly lacking decoration. The design was exceedingly simple, presumably because practicality had been the sole concern of its crafter. The weapon sat heavily and obtrusively on my palm, and it frightened me.

“Keep hold of this for your own protection,” Klaus murmured.

What the hell is going on? I should’ve asked Klaus. I should’ve assessed the situation from the information he’d given me. I should’ve used it to draw up a plan. I knew all of this, but my voice was stuck in my throat and refused to come out. I didn’t know what threat was pressing in on us, but my instincts were sounding alarm bells in my head.

I’m scared. I’m so very scared.

Klaus wrapped my trembling hands inside his own. His green eyes were so close to me, and I saw myself reflected in them. “Mary.”

“Bi... Kl...aus.” For a moment, I’d almost called him “Big Brother.” It was hard not to when he was wearing his brotherly smile.

“I will keep you safe. So don’t worry.” His large hands patted my head twice.

Klaus’s sudden shift to big-brother mode caused my eyes to widen. “Klaus?”

“Be a good girl and wait here while I have a look above deck. If you get scared, go to Bianca. She’s strange, but I doubt she’d do anything to harm you.”

What a thing to say with such a solemn look on his face.

Klaus saw my dumbstruck facial expression and narrowed his eyes kindly. “It’ll be fine, so trust me and wait here.”

At last, I understood Klaus’s intention. He was probably trying to reassure me. It had indeed worked, since my surprise had pushed the fear away, ever so slightly. My grip on the dagger got stronger.

Seeing that, Klaus gave a satisfied nod. “I’ll be back.”

After watching him turn around and leave the room, I jumped down from the bed. I pressed an ear against the door and silenced my breathing. The sounds of the waves and creaking wood seeped through the door, and the only other noise was the thunderous, rapid pounding of my heart. Wrapped around the

dagger's handle, my palms felt clammy with sweat.

I stayed there for a while, so tense that seconds felt like minutes—like hours—and wondered how much time had actually passed. But then, I heard a sudden and tremendous crash. At the same time, a huge tremor shook the ship.

I fell onto my backside, and before my eyes, the door slammed open. Cold air rushed inside my room, and the sounds of metallic clashes echoed throughout the corridor.

The next sound was Klaus's yell reverberating throughout the ship. "We're under attack!!!"

Shouts erupted one after another, and the ship came alive with uproar. Doors opened all over and people stumbled out of them.

"Pirates?!" someone shouted.

"Wake up!" bellowed another voice. "We're under attack!!!"

Half-naked sailors raced past my door, their footsteps heavy.

In my dazed head, I repeated what I heard them shout. *Pirates. Attack.* My mind registered these dangerous terms as nothing more than words, with no attachment to reality. My brain might've stopped functioning and had stubbornly refused to understand their meaning, but my body was more honest.

I began to tremble.

"Ah!"

The door. I need to close it.

Staring at the door to my cabin as it creaked and swayed, I pushed down with my feet, trying to rise. But my knees wouldn't budge, and I didn't manage to even stand up.

The clamor grew louder while I was fumbling—shouts, screams, and clashing steel. I wanted to shield my ears to muffle the terrifying sounds, but since this incident had started, my body had outright refused to obey me.

I crawled along the floor and reached my hand toward the door. The instant

before my fingertips could brush the wood, a large figure enveloped me, and I let out a shrill scream.

“Aaah!”

“Mary! You’re okay?!”

From within the embrace of the figure’s arms, my eyes grew as round as saucers. I’d felt this touch before, and I recognized her scent.

“Thank goodness,” she whispered breathily.

I knew her voice. I’d been holding my breath, but now I let it out in a shallow puff. “Bi...anca...”

“Hey, save the emotional reunion for later! I’m shutting us in!” Wolf followed Bianca into the cabin and slammed the door closed.

“You’re not hurt, are you, Mary?” Bianca asked. She put both hands on my cheeks and stared into my eyes. In the darkness, it seemed that she couldn’t tell just by looking. She ran her fingers across my face, checking for wounds.

Though still flustered, I nodded. “I-I’m okay.”

“You are? Thank goodness. Also, where’s your brother...?”

“He’s...above deck.”

“What?!” Bianca goggled at me.

Wolf, on the other hand, only nodded, appearing unsurprised. “Makes sense. I could tell from the way he carried himself that he was no ordinary person. I expect that he belongs to an order of knights or something, right?”

You can really tell all that? I thought, unable to conceal my astonishment.

“Maybe the reason no pirates have made it down here is thanks to your brother’s valiant efforts,” Wolf muttered. He leaned over and pressed his ear to the door, attempting to monitor the situation outside.

He was right. I could hear an endless stream of unpleasant noises from above, but nobody seemed to be descending the stairs. It was probably safe to assume that Klaus was up there fighting for us. I’d heard that he was strong. However, it was impossible for me to feel calm when I had no grasp of the strength or

number of our assailants.

Are they pushing him back? Is he gonna do something reckless by himself? The thought alone was enough to send pangs of heavy pain to my heart and stomach. I was annoyed that I was just sitting here, letting myself be protected, but I'd only get in the way if I went up there. I'd only put Klaus in even more danger.

I bit my lip.

Wolf stared at me with interest. "Worried about him?"

"Of course I am."

Why would you ask a question with such an obvious answer? I thought, furrowing my brows. When I raised my head, I met his eyes. They were devoid of warmth. I flinched, exposed to a gaze that seemed to be able to see into the depths of my soul. My mind was confused and in disarray.

Wolf left me and placed his hand on the door.

There was a tremendous clatter as something fell down the stairs. The next thing I heard was a person moaning.

I grew pale upon realizing that someone was injured. Instinctively, I stepped forward, but Bianca threw her arms around my body and stopped me.

"It might be a pirate," she whispered, her voice hushed.

She's right. They might not be on our side. Once I understood that, I clenched every muscle in my body.

What do we do if it's a pirate? Do we fight? How am I supposed to do that when I can barely even hold a dagger properly...?

My nerves troubled my breathing. *Calm down, calm down*, I repeated over and over in my head, but the effect on my physiological state was minimal.

I slid my hand into the pouch that hung from my waist and groped around inside until I felt two hard lumps with my fingertips. Coiling my fingers around them, I thought that I could sense my muscles relaxing, if just a minuscule amount.

Wolf shot a quick look at Bianca and me before pressing his ear back against the door. After a few seconds of listening, he gave the door a soft pull, then entered the hallway, leaving us behind in the room. When Wolf returned, he was carrying a familiar figure over his shoulders.

“Kurt!” I exclaimed.

Kurt was a member of the kitchen crew, and he’d treated me well. He usually wore a friendly smile, but at the moment, his face was pale and screwed up in agony.

Did he get stabbed?! I ran my eyes over his entire body and noticed something out of the ordinary—his left arm, which he was clutching with his other, was bent at an abnormal angle.

I gasped.

I couldn’t peel my eyes away from the point on his arm that was twisted in defiance of normal human anatomy.

“The bone’s broken,” Wolf said calmly.

His voice sounded distant to me.

“We need something to brace against it...” Wolf said. “Mary, can you patch him up?”

I said nothing. I was dumbstruck.

“Mary!” Wolf called, snapping me out of my daze.

“Huh?!” I raised my head instinctively, but my body wouldn’t stop shaking.

Wolf peered at me and probably realized that I was no good to anyone. He heaved a sigh. “Whatever. If you can’t move, then at least stand aside so you don’t get in our way.”

I couldn’t say anything.

“You don’t seem like the type to scare easily,” Wolf said, looking at Bianca. “Give me a hand.”

“Got it.”

He’d lost faith in me. He didn’t say so, but he didn’t have to—I knew. And yet,

my mind was too fraught to feel sadness or regret. In fact, I was even a little relieved that I'd been told I didn't have to do anything.

The very next emotion I felt was a surge of self-loathing.

Klaus is up there fighting. So are the sailors. Wolf, Bianca, everyone... They're all hard at work. Do I really want to be the only one cowering in the corner, terrified and trembling? Is that why I came on this journey?

Kurt let out a tortured groan. "Argh!" Perhaps because of his pain, his forehead was drenched in sweat.

I reached out to wipe it away, but Kurt caught my hand in midair. I could sense pleading in his feeble grip.

My sobs came unbidden. I was so disappointed by my own cowardice that tears welled in my eyes.

Pull yourself together, Rosemary.

What made you get to your feet? What made you take that first step forward? What made you leave the guaranteed safety of the palace? What did you want to do? Someone's suffering in front of you. He's looking to you for help. Are you just going to ignore him and cower in the corner? How's a woman like that ever gonna save the world?!

I freed my hand from Kurt's and placed both of my palms on my cheeks. I took a breath and then lifted my hands with great force.

Slap! The noise reverberated through the room.

"Hey?!" Bianca cried.

"What?!" Wolf said, taken aback.

I'd slapped my cheeks as hard as I could, and they began to redden.

In stark contrast to my vision, which was still blurry, my mind was now perfectly clear. I wiped the tears from beneath my eyes with the backs of my hands and stood up. "I'll help treat him."

"Mary..." Wolf started, but I didn't wait for him to snap out of his daze and finish his sentence.

I grabbed my bedsheets, ripped them into thin strips with the dagger, and constructed a bandage.

Once I'd started working at my task in complete silence, Wolf called out to me. "Mary, can you patch him up?"

It was the same question he'd asked before. But this time, my answer was clear. "I've never put the theory into practice before, but I have learned what to do."

"Okay. Then I'm leaving him to you." Wolf chuckled the sheath of his own knife at me. "Use this as a splint."

Though startled, I caught the sheath.

"B-But—"

"You wouldn't volunteer for a task you couldn't handle. You told me you're up to the job, so you can do this, can't you?" It was a question in form only.

My breath caught in my throat when he fixed his piercing eyes on me. I felt like I might choke, but I swallowed and persevered through the sensation.

"I can," I confirmed, my expression resolute.

I won't let myself be pampered anymore. If I don't do everything that's in my power right now, I'll be doomed to regret it.

Seeing the look on my face, Wolf smiled for the first time that day. "Very good. In that case, leave it to me to back up your brother."

"What?" I asked, unsure what he'd meant. But by the time I'd spoken up, Wolf already had one hand on the door. "Wolf?!"

"Wait here like a good kid." He glanced over his shoulder, blew me a kiss, and then charged up the stairs.

Conflict for the Personal Guard

Climbing the stairs onto the deck, I felt the cool sensation of the night air against my skin. I cast my eyes around my surroundings, but a white haze obscured everything from my view. It was foggy. What could be worse? This archipelago already offered undesirables plenty of places to lurk unseen, and night had already fallen. The arrival of sea fog on top of those conditions made me think that this ship had completely run out of luck.

I, Klaus von Behlmer, checked the area while resisting the urge to tut. Suddenly, I spotted a figure in the crow's nest, collapsed, body propped up by the railings. I was too far away to see whether he was dead or just unconscious.

I approached him, crouching in case arrows came flying. The collapsed figure stirred slightly. He must've still been alive. I breathed a sigh of relief and rested my hand against the mast, but then I heard a loud crash and the ship shook violently. Instinctively, I clung to the mast and waited for the shuddering to pass.

There was another jolt. A sturdy plank landed on the deck, forming a bridge from our ship to another one that had sidled up next to us.

"We're under attack!!!" I shouted, again and again, while clanging the pot that I'd borrowed from the kitchen on my way to the deck. I waited until I could hear sounds of activity below deck, and then chucked the pot away.

I drew a deep breath. Cold air filled my lungs. All of my senses were in a heightened state, and I felt terrifically alert. I glared into the fog in front of me while listening to the powerful beating of my heart. Beyond the plank bridge, I could see the blurry outlines of another ship and several figures. I heard the thud of footsteps, which lacked any and all decorum.

Here come uninvited guests, I thought. Scoundrels here to disrupt the journey of the one and only person I serve. The thought caused me to grip my sword's handle even tighter. I ground my teeth together, producing an unpleasant sound.

Taking hold of the sheath of my sword, I drew my blade in one movement. I took one step forward, then another, and another, and then I began to charge.

“Hey! Bring the ship closer!” one man shouted.

“Our first prey for ages. Don’t let none of ’em get away!!!” yelled another.

As I closed in on them, I began to make out faces. The men I saw were just as vulgar as the way they spoke.

“Outta my way! I’m gonna be the first one over!!!” one of them barked with delight as he pushed past the men in front of him and alighted onto the deck. The man blinked when he caught sight of me bounding toward him, and the instant before terror could paint over his vulgar smile, my sword slashed his windpipe.

A spurting fountain of blood dyed the deck red. The man stumbled forward, seeming not to comprehend what had just happened. He clutched at his neck and staggered a few steps backward until his back collided with the ship’s railings. His body then toppled and disappeared over the edge of the ship. A tremendous splash of seawater rose up.

“Wha... Whoa!!!” One of the others stood frozen and stupefied on the plank bridge as he watched his comrade plummet. I kicked him into the sea as well.

The next man drew his sword and put up a fight, but while he was distracted by our clashing blades, I kicked his feet out from under him. After he’d fallen flat on his face, I pinned him, pressing my foot onto his back, and pierced his heart from above. He let out a scream.

My surprise attack appeared to have confused the pirates. The man’s body was still twitching, so I kicked it into the sea. Another pirate charged toward me, roaring a battle cry as he lifted his blade into the air. The shrill sound of clashing swords followed.

“What are you playin’ at?!” the pirate screamed. “You’re gonna die!!!”

“You first,” I replied calmly.

He swung his sword down with all his might over and over, but I met each blow and deflected with my own. With a swipe of my blade, I parried his sword,

which disrupted the man's stance somewhat. I immediately closed in on him, drew the shortsword affixed to my waist, and plunged it into his right eye.

The man released a wretched scream and retreated, moving away from me. I took a step forward, planning to finish him off, but at the same time, a hand grabbed my collar.

My stance broke and my body arched backward. At that exact moment, an arrow whizzed through the air a hair's breadth above my head. The hand that'd grabbed me dragged me back onto the ship.

I looked around and saw a cloaked man standing behind me. He wore his hood low, so I couldn't see his face. However, I recognized him by the way that he stood, his stature, and that cloak—he was the one that'd vacated his room for the maid after she'd collapsed.

He released his grip on my collar and pulled his hand away. "You're charging in too far," he muttered disdainfully. The voice was male.

"Sorry...and thank you."

I expressed my honest gratitude, but he replied with an exasperated sigh.

"You're not suited to being a guard."

"What?" My head flung up. His comment was inexcusable.

But the very next moment, I felt his hand on the back of my head. "Down," he ordered curtly.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"What it sounds like. You're no good at fighting foes and protecting people at the same time."

"I'm—" I started to bite back, but then the man glanced toward me. His face was hidden from sight beneath his hood, but even so, I felt like his gaze had pierced me.

"Your combat style's sole purpose is killing, not protecting. A beast that can do nothing but charge in blindly is utterly incapable of protecting anything."

I lost my tongue.

The man turned his eyes away from me, apparently having said all that he'd wanted to. Still crouching, he thrust his hand into his breast pocket. His hand emerged with three thin knives—not normal knives, but throwing knives—each one held between two fingers.

Using his foot, the man hooked a bucket that was rolling nearby, pulled it toward himself, and then kicked it up. The bucket jumped high into the air, and two sharp arrows came flying toward it. One struck the bucket, and the force sent it rolling away into the distance.

The cloaked man rose, aiming to utilize the few seconds that it would take the pirates to notch more arrows. His hand scythed through the air and threw the thin knives. Two hit an archer, once in his upper arm and once in his throat, and the third buried itself to the handle between the eyes of another pirate.

“Let’s go,” he said.

I stood up, following his command, but my mind was a mess. *I’m not suited for fighting to protect people? Even though it’s my wish to be her shield, her sword?*

During battle, the slightest distraction could be fatal. I knew that, but I couldn’t drive the thought from my head. Even as I cut down enemies on all sides, my heart was heavy with gloom. *I want to protect Lady Rosemary. I want to protect her wishes and what she holds dear. But I don’t know how to. All I can do is slay every enemy around me.*

Amid the ruckus, a pained, muffled voice reached my ears. “Oomph.”

I whipped around to see a sailor losing ground against a pirate. At once, I shoved the pirate that I was crossing swords with and cut him open from shoulder to stomach with a diagonal slash. Then, I ran over to the sailor and severed the head of the pirate that had been just about to deal a killing blow.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah,” the sailor replied. He was sitting on the floor, stunned. “Thanks.”

I lent him my hand and pulled him to his feet before clapping him firmly on the shoulder, encouraging him to pull himself together. Immediately, I charged toward my next foe.

I'll be damned if I let a single person die, I swore to myself as I scanned the mayhem on the deck.

None of you will die.

I won't let any of you become a scar on my master's heart!

As for myself, I couldn't care less about the deaths of total strangers who meant nothing to me. But she—Lady Rosemary—would be upset. She'd blame herself and curse her own powerlessness for failing to save them. That wasn't a scenario I had to imagine; it was a fact that I'd learned after reflecting on past events. During the sorcerer abduction plot, she'd desperately tried to save the life of one of the perpetrator's pawns, a maid.

However, back then, I'd ignored Lady Rosemary's wish, choosing to protect her above all else. And it *had* been a choice. I could've saved the maid if I'd wanted to. But I'd worried that something unpredictable might happen, and I'd vowed to keep Lady Rosemary safe from all dangers, no matter how unlikely. To that end, letting a maid or two die hadn't mattered to me.

As a result, I'd ended up leaving a grievous scar on Lady Rosemary's heart, despite knowing how kind she was, and despite that kindness being the reason why I'd wanted to protect her in the first place.

I'm really not suited to being a guard, am I...? I thought.

"Hey!!!"

Something collided with me from the side. Once I understood that I'd been shoved out of the way, I peered in that direction. A man was currently blocking a pirate's sword with two large knives that he'd crossed over each other. He repelled the incoming blade and then pierced the pirate's heart in one motion.

With his foe incapacitated, the man turned around, then used the back of his hand to crudely wipe away the blood that had splattered onto his cheek. He shot me a sullen glare.

"Concentrate on what you're doing," he roared. "You want your sister to laugh at you?"

I gasped. He was the passenger that'd become friends with Lady Rosemary

recently. *I think his name was Wolf.* “How is my sister?”

“She’s doing a fabulous job below deck,” he answered. “I didn’t know she had it in her.” Wolf and I stood back-to-back and continued our conversation while fending off the pirates around us. “She’s fighting, just like you. You don’t want her to see her big brother slipping up, do you?”

His goading didn’t provoke any feelings of anger or annoyance in me. The only change was that my gaze was drawn toward the stairs leading below deck.

In truth, I hadn’t wanted to let her out of my sight for even a second. But at the same time, I knew that if I didn’t change that part of myself, I’d have no right to stand by her side.

The Reincarnated Princess Experiences Terror

A loud crash thundered from above. I wasn't sure how many times that'd happened, but my heart still jumped each time I heard it. I placed a hand on my chest and exhaled.

It's okay. Klaus will protect me. The sailors are fighting too, and Wolf said he'd help Klaus. I need to trust them and do what I can down here.

After telling myself that, I turned my eyes toward the person lying down in front of me. I'd finished treating Kurt's fracture...which sounded impressive, but the treatment had been simple; all that I'd done was wrap a bandage around the empty sheath, which was my improvised splint, press it against the injured part of his arm, and affix it there.

No wounds jumped out to me other than the broken arm and some bruising, but I'd left him lying on the floor since I was too scared to move him. I folded up some cloth to use as a makeshift pillow and rested it beneath his head.

Kurt wore an agonized expression. His brows were deeply creased, his cheeks were red, and a thin veil of sweat coated his forehead. He was likely suffering the onset of fever due to the fracture and bruising.

He let out a quiet groan, then shook his head, agony showing on his face. Sweat dripped from his forehead.

With my fingers, I brushed away the hair that'd clung to his skin, and then I wiped his cheeks and forehead with a towel. I shuddered when I saw the scrapes and bruises that covered his body. I would've liked to wash the blood and dirt away with a damp towel, but that would have to wait until Big Sis Bianca returned from the kitchen with the water.

I gently wiped the muck from his cheek with the front of my index finger. When I did, Kurt's tightly closed eyelids quivered, and he started to wake up.

"Kurt?" I called.

His eyelids drifted open in response to my voice. His gaze was glazed over,

lacking agency. However, a few seconds later, his eyes began to roam as though searching for something, albeit slowly.

The fingers of his right hand crept across the sheets. When I noticed his searching fingers, I took his hand without thinking. I wrapped mine tightly around his, and he squeezed back weakly.

I called his name once more. “Kurt.”

Guided by my voice, his eyes moved again. I stared into them, and they found mine. His lips moved, but, perhaps because he’d only just awoken, no sound came out.

If he wants anything, then I wanna make it happen. I can’t do very much right now, but even so...

“Say that again,” I requested so that I could hear it properly this time.

However, Kurt’s mouth remained shut. He just stared at me with eyes that were out of focus due to his fever. But then, he gently lifted his right hand and, for some reason, reached it toward my cheek.

I grew flustered, unsure of what he was doing, but then his fingers gently stroked my face. His touch was exceedingly delicate, as though he were checking to see if I was really there. *That, or he’s just too enfeebled to put strength into his limbs...*

I was unsure of what to do—I certainly couldn’t shake his hand away, but I was beginning to feel awkward leaving it there.

Still staring at me as I contemplated, he put on a gentle smile.

“...ddess...right here all along...” he murmured, but the clamor above deck drowned out his frail voice.

“What did you say?” I asked, but his eyes closed again before he could repeat himself once more. His hand fell away from my cheek, and I could tell from his breathing that he’d fallen asleep.

I wonder what he said? From the look on his face, I don’t think he was complaining about pain or troubled breathing.

I let out a sigh. After pulling the sheets off the bed, I laid them over Kurt.

“Sorry for the wait, Mary!” called Bianca as she rushed inside the cabin. Seeing that Kurt was asleep, she slammed her mouth shut.

“Bianca!” I stood up and took the bucket of water that she’d brought with her.

“Sorry for the noise,” she said.

“It’s fine. More importantly, I’m glad that you made it back safe and sound.”

“No worries there. The pirates don’t seem to have found their way down here yet. But...”

“Hm?”

Unusually for her, Bianca seemed to struggle to express herself as we engaged in a hushed conversation. She broke eye contact with me.

Has something happened...? I almost asked. I felt a wave of anxiety flood over me.

But then...

The door opened behind Bianca. I braced myself, but she waved a hand to stop me.

“Pardon us!” a man said.

“Sorry, Mary!” came a girl’s voice.

“Mia?” I asked.

Several people crowded into the room: first was Mia, then the male chamberlain, and in his arms, Flora.

“Hey, a little quieter, please!” Bianca softly fumed. “There’s an injured person resting in here.”

Mia apologized to her. The chamberlain looked at me, bowed his head, and then passed in front of me. He gently laid Flora down on the bed in the rear of the cabin. Flora was deathly pale and shivering. She was hugging her knees, which made her appear smaller than her actual size.

“They were hiding in a recess in the kitchen,” Bianca explained, “and they sorta, uh, tagged along... Sorry, Mary.”

The chamberlain, a man nearing old age, spoke up. “Forgive us. We were hoping to find something we could use as a weapon or a shield in the kitchen, but everything useful had already been taken... I’m ashamed to admit that we’ve brought nothing with us.” He hung his head.

“Where’s your guard?” I asked. *I’m pretty sure that Flora had a personal guard with her.*

The chamberlain opened his mouth to respond to my question, but Flora screamed and drowned his voice out. “He’s up there! He *left* me on my own to go fight above deck!”

“Lady Flora,” Mia said, “please, not so loudly.”

Flora had been trembling in fright moments ago, but her anger appeared to have momentarily eclipsed her fear. She rattled on through tears of frustration, deaf to Mia’s plea for quiet. “He’s supposed to be *my* guard! He thinks he can leave my side at a time like this?! My father will hear about this on our return, make no mistake about that!”

“Flora,” I said, walking over to her.

“What?!” She glared at me with tearful eyes.

“Quiet.”

“Who do you think you—”

“The more noise you make, the more you signal that we’re in here.” I appealed to her senses matter-of-factly. “You might draw the attention of the pirates.”

She’d been trying to argue, but after hearing me speak, she relented.

Although, by the look on her face, I know she isn’t happy about it.

“But this isn’t *right*...” Flora murmured quietly.

Her head sank, and, obeying the law of gravity, the tears that had welled in the corners of her eyes fell. I wasn’t sure whether she was crying because she was disappointed in her guard for not behaving as she’d hoped, or because she was frustrated by the prospect of her own death. Perhaps it was both.

She was shedding tears in silence, not quite sobbing, but I couldn't find the right words to console her because, frankly, I was barely managing to control my own anger at the outrageous situation we'd been placed in.

Why would they steal from us? my heart screamed. *Why are they trying to hurt us? What the hell did we ever do to them?!* The rational part of me understood that this was simply what pirates did, but my emotions fell short of that understanding. I was in no fit state to reassure anyone.

An awkward silence shrouded the room. However, a moment later, there was a noise loud enough to break the quiet.

The door flew open.

Bianca was the first to react. She stood in front of me and drew her knife from its sheath.

However, the new arrival was a sailor, not a pirate.

"Oof." He propped himself up against the wall. "Oh, this is your hiding spot?" he asked, wearing a troubled smile. "Sorry, I'll find somewhere else." But I noticed that his face was contorted with pain, and blood dripped through the gaps between his fingers, which were clutching his arm. The seeping blood was beginning to collect into a red puddle on the floor.

"You're hurt!" Bianca cried out, stopping the sailor as he tried to stagger out of the cabin.

"I'm fine. It's nothing serious—"

"Yes, it is!" Bianca exclaimed irritably, although she kept her voice low. She pushed him into the cabin and then looked at me.

I nodded in response and pulled an unused cloth from my hand luggage. "I'll treat your wound," I said. "Sit down."

"Uhhh, miss?" the sailor said, confused.

I looked at his injury. The affected area seemed to be his right forearm. There was a clean cut there, and blood was gushing from it. *The artery might've been sliced through. I need to stop the bleeding as quickly as I can.*

I was surprised at how oddly calm I felt. I must've gotten all of the panic out

of my system when Kurt came in.

I'll need to thank Wolf for setting me straight. But right now, I need to focus my attention on treating this wound.

I first rubbed the blood-stanching medicine into the opening of the wound, and then I placed a cloth over the top of it and applied pressure. The cloth immediately reddened. I piled another cloth on top of the first.

"Bianca, can you hold this down for me?" I requested.

"Sure," she replied.

While Bianca was applying pressure to the wound with the cloth, I quickly pulled some sheets from the bed to use as a bandage.

"I'm going to wrap it up tightly, so this may hurt," I warned.

"O...kay?" said the sailor.

As I was tightly wrapping the bandage around the sailor's arm, Flora snapped out of the daze she'd been in. She raised her voice, sounding confused. "H-Hey! What do you all think you're doing?!"

However, I had more pressing concerns to deal with than putting up with her, so I ignored her.

"That man might attract the pirates if he stays here!!!" Flora continued.

"Lady Flora, please, not so loud," cautioned Mia.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!!! Just kick him out of here alrea—?!" Flora began to make a great fuss, but Mia covered her mistress's mouth with the palm of her hand.

"Please pardon me, Lady Flora!" Mia then turned to me, and upon seeing my confused reaction, said, "Please, don't mind us, Mary. Help him."

I need to get the treatment finished quickly, both for the sailor and so that Mia's assistance won't be in vain. I put more strength into my hands as I wrapped the bandage, then tied it up tightly so that it wouldn't easily come undone.

"Raise your arm higher than your heart..." I instructed the sailor. "Yes, about

there. It might feel uncomfortable, but hold that pose for now.”

“I can handle it. And miss...” he said.

“Yes?” I answered while wiping away the blood with a damp hand towel.

“You’re amazing.”

I raised my head. His complexion was far from healthy, but his eyes were shining.

“You’re so tiny,” he continued, “and your face is as pretty as a doll’s, but you’ve got more guts than some grown men do.”

“I, uh...” *Is that a compliment, or...?*

The sailor smiled, apparently not offended by my noncommittal response. Judging from the look on his face, he didn’t mean it in a bad way.

“I...don’t have guts,” I murmured to myself.

All I ever do is let other people protect and mollycoddle me. I’m only where I am now thanks to the support and encouragement of the people around me, especially those who told me to pull myself together.

I felt like I was kicking as hard as I could to stay afloat in the deep end of a pool, and I was scared—the slightest nudge, and I felt like I’d sink.

Flora pried Mia’s hands away from her mouth. “Let go of me!” She slapped the maid’s hands away when Mia tried to cover her mouth again, and the sound echoed throughout the room.

“Do you remember who I am?!” Flora screeched. “Your insolence has gone too far!!!”

“Forgive me...but Lady Flora, please keep your voice down,” Mia replied with composure.

“You...impudent little...!!!” Flora’s cheeks flushed red with anger.

What should I do? I thought. *I want her to be quiet, but she’s not in the right frame of mind to listen. I’d just be adding fuel to the fire.* I glanced to my side, and my eyes met Bianca’s.

“*Put her to sleep?*” Bianca mouthed without speaking, and she performed a

chopping gesture with her hand.

A violent approach...but letting her throw her noisy tantrum could get us into more trouble.

While I was still considering my options, Flora pointed at me. “Everybody’s so obsessed with *her*!!! Nobody stops to listen to what I have to say...!!!”

My eyes grew round. I couldn’t conceal my bewilderment at suddenly finding myself the target of her tantrum.

“Lady Flora...” the chamberlain said, extending his hand toward her.

“Don’t touch me!!!” Flora shook his hand away, large teardrops trickling down her face. She suddenly stood up and headed toward the doorway.

“Hold on, where are you going?!” Bianca called out, trying to hold her back.

“Don’t touch me, I said!!!” Flora shouted, casting Bianca’s hand away, and then she opened the door.

This was more than I could stomach to sit back and observe. Frenzied, I grabbed Flora’s arm. “No, stay here!”

“Don’t order me around!!!”

She must be seeing red, I thought. She surely knew that it was dangerous out there, but she ignored our warnings. Because I was clinging to her arm, I ended up being dragged into the hallway with her.

The tumult that had been partially muffled by the walls of the cabin now sounded more real.

Raising my head, I spotted a large shadow cast on the stairs behind Flora. I gasped. A pair of feet came into sight next as the man ran down the stairs, and the next thing I saw was a bloodstained saber in his right hand.

Hurry up and hide, my brain ordered, but my body wouldn’t move as I wanted.

I tugged Flora’s hand, but she huffed and shook my grasp away. She hadn’t yet noticed the figure behind her.

“That hurts!” she said. “It’s past time you let go of me!”

The man looked up in reaction to Flora's voice. The hairs on the back of my neck pricked up when I saw the fiery, beast-like glisten in his eyes.

The Personal Guard Prays

A spurt of pirate blood sprayed onto my face. I wiped it away with the back of my hand, which was itself covered with blood, making the action more or less meaningless at this point. The slimy sensation was accompanied by the pungent smell of blood, but my nose was becoming desensitized enough that the stench didn't bother me.

The sounds of my heartbeat and my rough breathing, like that of a beast, were almost deafening. My arms were heavy and my mind was beginning to lose concentration. However, my eyes prowled in search of prey.

I really am a beast now, I thought, and a self-deprecating smile rose to my lips.

Today wasn't actually the first time I'd been told that I wasn't suited to being a guard. I'd heard it as an insult, and I'd heard it whispered behind my back, but that wasn't all—I'd also heard it from the few friends that I shared my innermost thoughts with and from elders that I respected.

"The way you fight," they'd told me, "you might be able to wipe out all of your enemies, but your charge won't live to see it. Who would entrust their life to a person that prioritizes killing over protecting?"

Now that I reflected on what I'd been told, I realized that their complaints had been brutally honest and delivered for my benefit. Back then, though, I'd ignored every word. In truth, I'd only begun to take notice after I'd been charged with guarding Lady Rosemary.

In my heart, protecting her served a greater purpose than merely fulfilling my duties. The idea of handing her over to someone else just because I wasn't suited to the task had been out of the question.

And so, I'd devoted my entire attention solely to protecting her. I'd decided that I wouldn't let her out of my sight for even a second, that I wouldn't leave her side, and I'd avert my eyes from absolutely everything that wasn't her.

Foolishly, I'd believed that I'd be able to protect her by doing that. And as a result, my peers' opinions of me had remained unchanged. Obviously.

I hadn't understood anything...neither the concerns of my friends and superiors nor Lady Rosemary's feelings. Nothing. And I still didn't.

What do I need to do to protect her? What do I need to do to become a guard worthy of protecting her? What do I need to do to see her smile?

"Still breathing, Klaus?" Something bumped into my back. The small collision interrupted my daydreaming. "Phew, I'm beat," Wolf said, his shoulders heaving as we fought back-to-back. Then, he chuckled. "Must be my age."

"You can't be that old," I said.

"Older than you, anyway... I think."

I cast my eyes across our surroundings while making idle chitchat. The people still on their feet were, for the most part, out of breath. Many of the sailors who were unaccustomed to battle looked particularly exhausted. The only people on our side still able to move with any vigor were myself, Wolf, and the cloaked man.

The pirates had been reduced in number quite considerably as well. Their morale didn't seem particularly high anymore. They probably hadn't counted on a merchant vessel putting up such a tough fight. *One more push should be all that's needed for them to turn tail and run.*

After thinking that, I looked over to the pirate ship that was floating next to ours, and my eyes widened. A few of the pirates had kicked the plank bridge into the sea and were trying to move the ship away. Although it was just a galley, the handful of oarsmen that had returned over the plank bridge wouldn't be enough to row the ship well.

Even so, the ship began to lumber away.

Noticing their comrades' flight, a few of the pirates scrambled to jump back to their own vessel, only to fall into the sea.

Wolf's brows furrowed deeply as he observed the spectacle. "They're of course free to leave, but I'd rather they took their friends with them."

“Do you think they’ll call it a day and surrender?” I asked while peering at the abandoned pirates.

Wolf at once shook his head in denial. “As if. Most captured pirates get taken to the gallows.”

My thoughts were the same as Wolf’s.

Confirming our assumption, the pirates didn’t abandon the fight. Far from it, they began to glare in all directions like wounded beasts, their eyes gleaming.

More trouble for us, I thought. Rational minds can’t begin to imagine the things that people do when they’re backed into a corner. It would be wise to rid myself of any wishful thinking about capturing them alive.

I narrowed my eyes as I fixed the pirates in my glare, and then I saw one of them start moving. As soon as I understood where he was headed, I began to sprint.

I won’t let you. You will not go there!

However, before I could catch up to the man, I glimpsed another pirate moving in my peripheral vision. He was reaching his hand toward a sailor who was wounded and howling with pain.

I can’t afford to hesitate. I shouldn’t, I mustn’t, but...

But my legs changed their course, against my wishes. *What am I doing? There’s nothing worth prioritizing over Lady Rosemary.*

Startled by my own actions, I sliced off the pirate’s hand as it was grabbing the sailor’s neck. I left the pirate rolling around on the floor and screaming. Once more I resumed my chase of the pirate heading for the stairs.

However, another pirate blocked my path and began to attack me in the desperate manner of one fighting for their life. Crossing swords with him, I experienced a dizzying amount of anger and annoyance.

I was so frustrated with my own stupidity that I felt sick.

I’m fretting and distracting myself and getting greedy... And by doing that, by trying to have the best of both worlds, I might slip up and lose her—the one person that matters more to me than anyone else in the world. Death would be

too lenient a punishment for such a stupid blunder.

But what else can I do? a different voice shouted in my mind. *Protecting just Lady Rosemary while leaving the sailors to die would only be a repeat of the past.*

I gritted my teeth so hard that I could've shattered my molars.

In my mind flashed the face of a man who outclassed me enormously. *Would you even have to grapple with this dilemma, Captain? Would you just effortlessly save both? Is my ineptitude putting her in danger?*

"Get out of his way, you piece of shit!!!" someone roared.

The pirate that had stood in front of me, blocking my path, suddenly disappeared. A ferocious kick from the side had sent his body flying away, far enough for him to crash into the side of the ship.

My eyes grew wide. I was struggling to understand what had happened. In front of me stood Wolf, his shoulders heaving.

Wait, did that menacing threat from a moment ago come from him?

"What are you standing around for?! Get going and save her!" He shoved me forward. "Fighting isn't my day job, so I can't protect her like you can. I'll hold them back, so hurry up and go to her!"

"I owe you one!" I turned my back to Wolf and raced away.

I cursed the narrowness of the stairwell as I descended, and at the bottom of the stairs I found the pirate, facing away from me. I enjoyed a brief moment of relief when I saw that he hadn't yet entered the cabin, but then I spotted a small figure beyond the pirate.

My breathing stopped.

I felt the blood drain from everywhere in my body. My heart thumped so hard that it hurt, and everything began to sound distant. I prayed that I was wrong, that it wasn't her, but at the same time, a calm voice in the recesses of my mind said, *There's no way that I could ever mistake someone else for Lady Rosemary.*

I took one step closer, then another, and my assumption hardened into conviction. Although Lady Rosemary was pale faced and trembling, she was

standing in defense of someone else. The sight of her like that was so sadly beautiful. My feet felt like they were moving laboriously slowly as they pounded against the floor. The movement of the pirate's sword as he raised it aloft seemed awfully slow, and it etched itself into my retina.

Lady Rosemary noticed my presence, and our eyes met over the top of the pirate's shoulders. I felt like I could sense a look of relief mixed into the pure surprise on her face, or maybe I only hoped that I could.

"Shut your eyes!!!" I shouted. At once, Lady Rosemary scrunched her eyes closed.

She trusts me... I doubt that she knows how delighted that makes me feel.

I charged into the pirate and pierced his heart from behind. I felt my blade dig into his flesh and heard the brief yowl that clawed its way out of his throat. It sounded like a beast's, utterly inhuman.

Shit. I should've told her to cover her ears as well. That was my initial reaction.

Oh, my one and only, my dear Lady Rosemary... I'm sorry. The captain would've done a better job of saving you.

The pirate's limp body crumpled to the floor.

With no obstruction between us anymore, Lady Rosemary filled my vision.

She looked paler than she had a moment ago. Twitches and trembles ran across her entire body. Though her eyes were closed, she only needed to hear that scream to know what had happened. Even so, she still kept her eyes closed, just as I'd instructed her to, and the sight made my heart ache.

I extended my hand toward her, hoping to reassure her if only a little. But then I noticed that my hand was covered with blood, so I clenched my fist and pulled it back. *I mustn't touch her, mustn't sully her.*

"La—"

I almost addressed her as "Lady Rosemary," but I stopped. This wasn't because I'd remembered that I had to call her "Mary," and neither was it because I'd noticed Bianca von Diebolt emerge from the cabin. It was because an ear-piercing shriek cut me off.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

The woman that Lady Rosemary had been protecting noticed the corpse crumpled at her feet and began to scream.

Lady Rosemary jumped out of her skin and hurriedly turned around to face the woman.

However, the woman ran away before Lady Rosemary could stop her. She must’ve been unable to stand her own overwhelming fear any longer. Driven by primal instincts, she ran away and started rushing up the stairs, of all places.

“Wait!” Lady Rosemary cried, trying to stop her, but she didn’t hear.

I tutted and chased after her. Upon reaching the deck, I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her back downstairs. However, she put up a crazed resistance.

“Let go!” she screamed, twisting her body.

If this continued, then we’d both tumble down the stairs. While I struggled to decide what to do, something whistled through the air.

I don’t remember what happened next very clearly. My actions were probably driven by pure instinct. When my senses returned to me, I found that I’d thrown my body around her, covering her.

I heard a dull thud and felt something hit my back. A moment later, I felt something that wasn’t exactly pain—it was more like a searing heat.

“Klaus!!!”

Through my wide-open eyes, I saw Lady Rosemary running toward me with tears beginning to flow.

“You’re supposed to call me ‘Big Brother,’” I ought to have reminded her. Instead, my stiff expression relaxed, in spite of the present situation. *It feels like it’s been so long since you’ve called me by my name.*

“Klaus! Klaus!!!”

Please don’t cry. I want you to smile...no matter what happens.

The Reincarnated Princess Flounders

There was a dull thud, and Klaus stopped moving.

I couldn't comprehend what had happened, but I had a terrible feeling about it. I called Klaus's name again and again, as though I were trying to reassure myself. My restless heart screamed at me to sprint over to him, and my body obeyed. At practically the exact moment that I reached the top of the stairs, Klaus collapsed to his knees.

I saw the arrow sticking out of his back, and my eyes grew wide.

I called his name again, unable to believe what I was seeing. "Kl...aus." But my voice came out as a horrible, almost unintelligible croak.

I clutched at my chest. It felt like I was suffocating, like I was gasping for air. I could hear the awful sound of my breath escaping my mouth, and I could barely see anything through the veil of tears that had welled up in my eyes, unbidden.

Klaus didn't stir from his crouched position. I did see a slight twitch in his hands, which were pressed onto the floor.

His body swayed. I'd been frozen to the spot, but my reflexes made me run over to him. I tried to catch him, but I couldn't support his weight and fell onto my backside. He was more or less crushing me because of the vast difference in our sizes, but I nonetheless wrapped my arms around his waist in a desperate bid to hold him upright.

Just then, I felt something slimy and wet touch my palm, and the smell of iron that entered my nose told me what that slime was. It was different from the half-dried blood of his enemies that was splattered in patches across his clothes and hair. No, the lukewarm liquid was his lifeblood, and it had come from within his body.

"Klaus?" I called again. I had lost track of how many times I'd said it. Even so, he didn't answer. He wouldn't answer me.

His eyelids were firmly shut, and his face was contorted with agony. It was so

pale that I shuddered to look at it.

“Klaus...” I called again. “Klaus!!!” I yelled, as if trying to drown out my own fear. I was in pieces.

Somebody grabbed my shoulder. “Mary!” The man placed his hands on my cheeks and swiveled my head, locking eyes with me. “Calm down,” he said admonishingly.

“W-Wolf...”

He breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing me react to his voice. “That’s right,” he said. He then peered toward Klaus, who was resting on my lap. Wolf observed Klaus for a while, then he wrinkled his nose.

He cast his eyes across the deck, spotted something, raced over to it, and then picked it up—a wooden bucket with an arrow protruding from it. He wrenched the arrow out and brought his nose to the arrowhead. Then, as though testing it, he licked it with the tip of his tongue. His brows furrowed deeply. Wolf spat onto the deck and ran back over to us.

“Mary, I want you to gag your brother,” he said.

“Huh...?” He looked serious, but I couldn’t understand what he was asking. My brain was completely failing to function.

My mind was utterly blank, so Bianca responded instead. “Will this do?” She pulled his jaw down to open his mouth and then stuffed a cloth inside. “Leave the rest to us, Mary,” she said in a tone that one would use to address a child. She then swapped places with me.

“I’m pulling the arrow out,” declared Wolf.

“That’ll make the bleeding worse. Shouldn’t we leave it there to plug the hole?” Bianca asked.

With his hand on the arrow, Wolf spoke in a low tone of voice. “It’s poisoned.”

I repeated that word in my blank mind.

Poisoned.

I knew it. I'd heard it before. But my brain refused to register the meaning. It felt like the soft part of myself inside my heart was screaming, *Don't listen! Don't process that word!*

Wolf clenched his fingers around the arrow and yanked it out with one quick tug. Fresh blood spurted from the wound, and a muffled scream erupted from Klaus.

"Somebody get my stuff from my room!" Wolf shouted to everyone around. "I need some water, cold and boiled, and clean towels!"

The sailors that were still on their feet in spite of their wounds listened to his instructions and took off.

"Hold him still!" Wolf instructed Bianca. He then brought his face near Klaus's wound. It seemed like he was sucking blood from the split flesh where the arrow had been, and Klaus's body writhed violently from the pain of that sensation. Wolf spat Klaus's blood from his mouth onto the deck and then repeated the same action.

There were no longer any living pirates on deck. Piles of lifeless corpses were stacked high, and beyond them, the sky had turned red. For a moment, I thought that dawn had arrived, but morning was still quite some time away.

So why's the sky red? I thought. I turned my gaze in that direction, and there, I saw the burning ship. Afloat in the black water of the nighttime sea, the galley was ablaze. I could hear feral screams as burning people dove into the water. The sight unfurled before my eyes in slow motion, and I wouldn't be wrong to call the scene a hellscape.

And yet, all that I could manage to do was gawk up at the sky. I couldn't even muster a scream.

A lone bird soared through the night sky, which was currently illuminated by the columns of flames. The bird was as black as smoke, and it blended with the darkness, vanishing from sight.

A soft sob reached my ears.

While everyone else was running to and fro, one other person was planted on the floor and unable to move, just as I was. It was a girl, weeping and hugging

herself, her nails clawing into her arms—Flora.

“I-It’s m-my...my fault that he...” She mumbled half sentences through fits of sniffing while staring at the spot where Klaus was lying on the floor. “I’m sor—I’m sorry...” Flora wasn’t looking just at Klaus; she turned her eyes to me as well. Her apology was probably intended for the both of us.

She claimed that it was her fault, and I was neither strong enough nor kind enough to disagree. *If I agree with her, will this lump in my heart go away? Will it make me feel better to paint her as the villain and exclaim that it’s her fault?* I stared at Klaus’s pale face.

“Mary!” Somebody called my name, but I was too exhausted to reply.

I slowly, silently turned my head to follow the voice. Wolf was staring at me sternly. *Is he gonna lose faith in me again? Or is he gonna get mad this time?*

Let him. Whatever he does... Whatever anyone does... I don’t care anymore.

I didn’t know how he perceived me as I sat there with a hollow look in my eyes, but he responded with a wincing look of pity. Wolf stood up and walked over, kneeling down in front of me. I saw the sincere look in his eyes as he gazed into mine.

“He means a lot to you,” Wolf said, “and I promised to protect him... I failed. I’m sorry.” He lowered his head.

That took me by surprise, and I blinked several times.

“But,” he continued, “I will *not* let him die. I swear on the name Wolf K. Lucker.”

“He won’t die?” I whispered, my voice feeble.

“That’s right.” Wolf smiled. “I’ll keep my promise this time.” There were tears in his eyes.

Wolf won’t let him die, I told myself. He won’t die. Klaus won’t...die. I felt like the numbness that had ensnared my body was fading away, bit by bit.

I dropped my gaze to Klaus, and my trembling fingers reached toward his hand. “Klaus...” I squeezed his hand in mine, but he didn’t squeeze back. Even so, his skin definitely still possessed a warmth that proved his blood was still

flowing.

“This your stuff, mister?!” a sailor asked.

“That’s it. Thanks!” Wolf grabbed his things from the sailor and spread them out across the deck. “I could use some light to see what I’m doing.”

“Hey!” the sailor called. “Bring a torch!”

Wolf’s belongings turned out to be a vast collection of little parcels, a small scalpel-like knife, and some metal objects I didn’t recognize. There were also small bottles filled with liquid, a few bowls, something like a mortar and pestle, and various other things.

“Pirates from Flanmer’s southern seas... They’d probably use a mixture of fish and plants in their poisons. Going by the taste and smell...” Wolf kept muttering to himself with a serious look in his eyes as he picked up various packages.

He selected several of the parcels without hesitation, unwrapped them, and removed their contents. Some contained dried leaves or roots from plants and others contained powders. He took the contents from several of the packages, applied a binding agent, and then kneaded them together. He was obviously experienced—that was evident from the smooth way his hands worked.

“The water’s boiled!” a sailor announced as he approached us carrying a bucket. It was Paul. Blood was seeping through the bandages tied around his arm and his thigh, but he wasn’t acting like he was in pain. His face harbored a desperate look.

Why is he going to such lengths? I thought, but I couldn’t manage to ask that out loud. I simply stared up at him.

Paul noticed my gaze and crouched down so that his eyes were level with mine. His large hands ruffled my hair. “Don’t cry, miss. It’s all right. We’re all gonna do our best to save your brother.”

“Wh-Why...?”

“Hmm?”

“Why are you trying to save him?” I asked.

Paul goggled at me. Despite appearing taken aback, he asked, “What else

would I do?" From the look on his face, it seemed like he thought nothing could be more obvious. "You've been a godsend to us—you should know that. Now's the time for us to pay you back."

"Huh?"

"Plus, your brother saved our backsides more than once when he was fighting... And that's no easy task, considering all the mayhem back there. Everyone aboard this ship owes you a debt that can never be repaid." Paul then pointed to the top of the stairs and said, "Look, see?"

Mia had clambered up the stairs, and she was panting as she bounded toward us. "Excuse me! I've brought some clean towels!"

Jan also arrived with more hot water. His brows furrowed when he saw my face. "You don't look so good, miss... You must be freezing. Hey, someone get her a blanket!"

I raised my head and saw that everyone that could stand was darting here, there, and everywhere. Several times, I'd catch people looking at me and Klaus with concern, and each time that I met their eyes, they'd offer me words of encouragement.

It was difficult to breathe. My eyes were on fire and my nose felt like it was burning. I could feel tears coming, although I didn't know where from... I'd cried so much already that I was surprised I had any left to spill.

But this time, it's different... These aren't tears of sadness. I roughly wiped the fresh moisture away from my eyes with the back of my hand. *This isn't the time to be crying. It's not the time to foist all the responsibility onto others either. Nothing will improve as long as I'm averting my eyes and neglecting what I need to do.*

Don't stop. Move. Claw and scrape as much as you can. That's always been my motto.

"I'll help, Wolf," I declared.

"Mary... You don't—"

"I'm okay now," I said, rolling up my sleeves.

Wolf's eyes widened in utter shock, and he looked up at me, frozen. However, that only lasted a few seconds. He quickly recovered his composed expression and gave me instructions. "Cool the boiling water down a little and clean the wound."

"Okay!"

Following his instructions, I transferred the boiling water into a tray to lower its temperature. Once it had cooled down enough that it wouldn't burn Klaus, I cleaned and rinsed his wound. When I did so, there was no reaction from him, so he must've passed out. Blood was still seeping from the injury, which worried me, but that also probably aided in removing the poison from his body. The choice to use warmer water was probably intended to inactivate the poison as well.

After washing the wound, I continued to follow Wolf's instructions on how to proceed with Klaus's treatment. I cut open his clothes with a knife and exposed his torso, then wiped the blood away. The brand-new cloth I was holding turned deep red in the blink of an eye. The thought that this massive amount of blood belonged to Klaus... It almost left me paralyzed. But I shook my head to dispel the fear and kept on with my job.

After rubbing the medicine that Wolf had mixed up into Klaus's wound, I moved on to the task of stopping his bleeding. I applied pressure to the injury with my hands, but then I realized that I didn't have any bandages. I scanned the deck with my eyes and found one a small distance away.

I opened my mouth to ask Bianca to retrieve the bandage for me, but I paused for a moment. This was because I'd noticed the person behind Bianca.

"Flora," I called.

"Huh?" She looked as helpless as a lost child as her eyes wobbled slowly to look at me. She'd been sitting on the deck this whole time, trembling. Through the tears in her eyes, she stared at me.

"Could you bring me that bandage?" I requested.

"Me?" she asked after a pause.

"Yes. Give me a hand." She just sat there, dumbfounded, so I continued

explaining. “I want to save Klaus... Please.”

She appeared shocked for a moment, but then said, “Okay.” Flora wiped away the tears that’d streaked across her face and then reached for the bandage. Although she was unsteady on her feet, she tottered her way over to us.

Sorry about earlier, I apologized in my head. I was weak, and because of that, I tried to pin all the blame on you. I tried to twist the truth to suit my needs so that I could protect myself from emotional damage, even though I bear a share of the responsibility.

After dragging Klaus abroad and mixing him up in my own selfish plans, I don’t deserve to weep here like I’m the victim.

“After you’ve closed the wound, make sure he stays warm,” Wolf instructed.

“Understood,” I replied.

To warm Klaus up, I dipped some towels into hot water before placing them on his body. Wolf kept an eye on our progress, even though he was busy mixing up batches of medicine. Each time I finished one task, he’d poke his head over at just the right time to tell me what to do next.

And so, I carried on, wiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. After doing this, I noticed a dark-brown liquid sticking to my wet fingers. At first, I thought that the liquid was blood, but the smell was different. However, I was too busy to investigate what it was, and the mystery substance vanished into the back of my mind.

The Viscount's Daughter in Shock

"It's come into sight! We're nearly there."

I, Bianca von Diebolt, raised my head in reaction to the sailor's voice. There was land in the direction that he was pointing. A red and mostly even terrain was spread out across the horizon.

When I looked more closely, I noticed a town. This wasn't Burao, the port city located to the southeast of Flanmer that we'd set out for. No, it was a port town even further to the south. I worried whether the facilities there would be enough since the town wasn't as extensive as Burao, but we had no other options—Klaus hung in the balance of life and death.

Although Wolf's deft instructions and medicines had succeeded in keeping him alive, he could take a turn for the worse at any moment. Wolf's expertise was only worth so much on a ship, where the available options were limited. And now, we were practically cleaned out of water, towels, and medicine.

Our situation was desperate, but nobody was acting pessimistic; everyone was running around and devoting all their efforts to do whatever was currently in their power. "Everyone" included the wounded people on the ship, as well as that spoiled noble girl who'd been bawling her eyes out not long ago.

Why was that? If anyone on the ship had been asked, they'd all have given the same answer: "*Because she hasn't given up.*"

"Did you hear that, Klaus?" said Mary, the girl who was holding Klaus's hand. "We're nearly there."

I wasn't sure whether she was conscious of the fact that she was calling him "Klaus" and not "Big Brother," but the rest of us had more or less figured out the truth—they weren't actual siblings. Mary had been raised with proper etiquette, and Klaus handled a sword like a master. Their true relationship was probably that of a noble girl and her guard; however, nobody was tactless enough to point that out.

“Hang in there.” Mary uttered her words like a prayer, and everyone’s eyes were drawn to her.

And once her visage entered our collective view, we couldn’t tear our eyes away from what we saw. The morning sun peeked above the horizon behind Mary, its light delineating her silhouette as she sat with Klaus’s hand in hers. The salt breeze blew through her hair, which was no longer braided. Although she’d dyed her hair a dark brown, the very ends of the strands had returned to their original color. Maybe she’d used a dye that was designed to wash out with hot water. Her true shade was platinum blonde, and it shone brilliantly in the sunrise.

I couldn’t help but be captivated by the sight. As I stood there, entranced, I heard someone whisper croakily, “The goddess.” Though the voice belonged to a single person, the same thought must’ve been running through everyone’s mind.

Mary was in a pitiful state. Her hair was tangled and it clung to her sweaty forehead and neck. Her face, her hands, her clothes... Everything was filthy, coated in blood and muck. And yet, despite all of that, as I looked at her face from the side, she seemed more beautiful than anyone or anything.

The ship slipped into the harbor silently; nobody dared to call out for Mary and disturb her.

The harbor itself was overflowing with morning traffic. Plenty of people were rowing small boats, but there wasn’t another sailing vessel as large as ours. This wasn’t a commercial port like Burao but a small port for local fishermen. The water was too shallow for big ships to pass through easily, and ours only barely made it in.

Armed townsfolk began to gather on the dock, probably alarmed by the arrival of an unfamiliar vessel. The sailors on our ship waved a white cloth to signal our peaceful intentions.

Once the ship had drawn near the wharf, a figure approached. This man, who appeared to be over forty, glared at us with undisguised wariness in his eyes and a drawn sword in his hand.

“If you want to live, then turn around and leave this instant,” he warned.

“Let us dock!” a sailor protested. “We have wounded!”

“I refuse,” the man stated. “You think I’d let some strange ship in here? You must think I’m stupid.”

“This ship sails under the flag of the Kingdom of Nevel, and we have a permit authorizing us to dock in Burao. Some of us were injured when pirates attacked... Please, help us!”

The man squinted at the supplicating sailor. He screwed his face up in a way that made things clear—he didn’t appreciate having this trouble brought to his home. “All the more reason for you to get a move on! How are you gonna make it up to us if the pirates follow you here?!”

The man’s worries were justified. Everyone wanted to protect themselves, and that was doubly true if the safety of family and friends was being put at risk. Outsiders readily got left out to dry for the sake of the community.

Though unjust, I could understand his position. But even so, we had to keep trying, no matter what he said. We also couldn’t afford to let the argument drag on any longer; time was running out.

As I was considering my next move, a young woman’s voice reached my ears. “Th-They’re all dead, the pirates...!”

I turned my head to the side and found the spoiled noble girl, Flora.

“A skilled knight happened to be on board, and he slew them all,” Flora explained in a desperate bid to convince the man that there was nothing to worry about. “Their ship burned down as well, so nobody’s followed us here.”

I couldn’t conceal my shock at her actions.

Both her voice and her white, slender fingers, which were clinging onto the ship’s railings, were trembling. “So, please, let us in.” From the side, I could see that her face was pale, and a bead of sweat dripped down her neck.

She was probably frightened by the man looking up at her from the wharf, and also by the sword in his hand...which made sense, given that her life had been in danger not so long ago. Yet, with no regard for this fear, she maintained eye contact with the man.

Just a little while ago, she was curled in a ball and crying, unable to do anything but shiver. Where has she been hiding this courage?

Even so, her plea didn't move the man. "Can you prove that?" he asked. It was clear from the look on his face and by the sound of his voice that he was certain she couldn't.

"I..." Flora bit her lip.

"No?" He sneered as he brushed off the pleas of the frail little girl. "Then get a move on, my cute little lady."

What a disgraceful excuse for a person... You coward! I showered him with contempt in my mind and entertained the thought of getting a little violent, perhaps goading him into a duel.

"I-I won't be leaving!" Flora raised her voice as though to dispel her own doubts. "My name is Flora von Gratz, and I'm the eldest daughter of Baron Gratz!" Flora declared this sternly, her head held high. Her legs were jittering and she stumbled over her words, but even so, she gave her all to act the part of a proud noble. "Do you think you'll be able to escape punishment after turning me away?"

"Wow, so you're a lady? I did think you were dressed nicely." The man fixed an appraising stare on Flora.

As his intrusive gaze crept up and down her body, she squirmed uncomfortably. I could sense her distress from the look on her face. She must've believed that declaring her family name would give her the upper hand, if only by a little. However, the man didn't recoil in awe. He didn't even flinch.

"And?" he said. "Why should I care what a foreign noble wants?"

After a pause, Flora said, "My great-aunt is related to the family of Marquis Eigel and—"

"Good for her," the man interrupted with a snort. "No good for you, though. If you were one of Flanmer's nobles, I could see how turning you away would bring us problems down the road. But you come from another country. Is your family influential enough to meddle in the affairs of a nation half a world

away?”

“I... I’m...” Flora’s eyes slowly began to swell with tears, but she didn’t cry. Although her words had come to a halt and she looked frustrated, I could see in her eyes that she hadn’t given up. She was desperately grasping for the right words to use.

“That’s enough. You’ve done well,” I wanted to say. I wanted to throw my arms around her shoulders and pat her head. *I never imagined that I’d end up feeling this way about that spoiled noble girl, whom I once took for such a brat. Life is full of mysteries.*

“What’s it to me who’s a baron or a marquis?” the man asked. “Our livelihoods are on the line here. If you’re that desperate for us to take notice of you, then you should’ve at least brought some royalty with you! Then we would’ve brought you all the doctors you could ask for!” The man’s nose twitched as he laughed derisively.

Suddenly, a dignified voice spoke up. “You’ll honor your word?” She hadn’t shouted, but her words carried clearly through the air.

All eyes gathered on the same spot. The source of the voice stood up straight and took a step forward. Her shoes thudded against the floor.

“Wh—” The man flinched when she turned the spotlight of her gaze directly on him. He held back the insult that had been on his lips and retreated a step back.

She—Mary—wasn’t glaring at him. Far from it, I couldn’t find even a trace of anger or irritation on her face. She didn’t raise her voice, and she maintained a calm facial expression. Even so, the grown man on the wharf was overwhelmed by the presence of this little girl.

“You stated that you’d accept demands from a member of a royal family,” Mary said. “Is that correct?”

“S-So what?!”

“Is. That. Correct?”

“It is. But so what?!” the man barked, as though ashamed of himself for being

overawed by Mary.

In response, Mary flashed a pretty smile and said, "I'll hold you to that."

Although she must've only been thirteen or fourteen, her smile carried an intensity beyond her years. The words "weirdly beautiful" flitted through my mind. I'd always known that she was more than just a cute little girl, but I could never have anticipated...this. *Just who in the world is she?* I thought. Hints were scattered everywhere, but my brain failed to recognize them properly.

Everyone watched Mary, unable to utter a single word. She spun around, returned to the spot where Klaus lay, and grabbed a bucket filled with warm water.

"Are you aware of the distinguishing features of Nevel's royal family?" asked Mary as she made her way back toward the man, carrying the heavy bucket with both hands.

"I-I am..." the man sputtered. "Everyone is."

Few would be able to describe the appearance of members of a royal family, especially another kingdom's. But Nevel's royals were famous... So famous that fishermen living in a small town in a far-off country could say, "Everyone knows."

Each member of that royal family was stunning. And so, they captured the hearts of countless people as word of their beauty spread from mouth to mouth, woven into rumors and the ballads of minstrels.

"Does that include the first princess?" Mary asked.

"Of course," the man said. "After all, everyone says she's guaranteed to be one of the most beautiful women in the world when she grows up."

At that point, for the first time, Mary broke her composure. "I'm not sure about *that*," she murmured quietly to herself, wearing a troubled look on her face. But that cute expression of hers vanished within a few seconds. "What does she look like?" Mary asked, urging the man to continue.

"What does she look like?" he repeated. "Let's see... White skin."

And Mary's skin was as white as fresh snow.

“Blue eyes.”

And Mary’s eyes were as blue as the reflection of the clear sky in the sea.

“Wavy hair, which is a shade of blonde like the sun...”

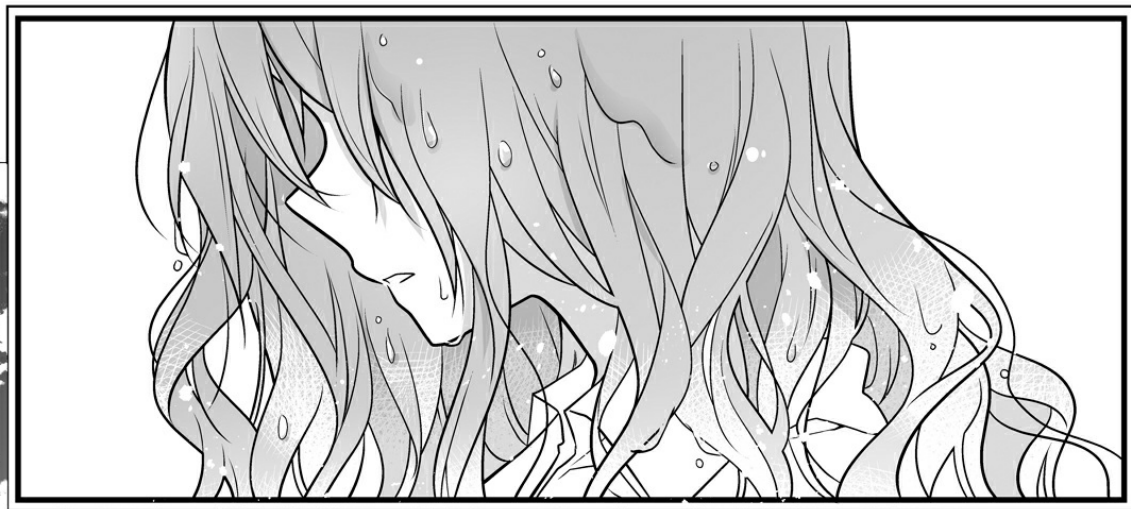
As he was saying those words, Mary lifted the bucket above her. Before anyone could call out to stop her, she tipped it, and the warm water gushed onto her head.

The man jumped with astonishment at Mary’s actions, and then, when he saw what happened next, he was so shocked that he lost the ability to speak.

The bucket dropped from Mary’s hands as she stood in a dignified pose, enveloped by the sunlight behind her in the eastern sky. Even I stood frozen, dazed and captivated by the sight of her, as the sound of the bucket hitting the floor reached my ears.

Droplets of water fell from her platinum-blond hair, which shone more brilliantly than the morning sun. Her wet skin was as smooth and beautiful as alabaster. She brushed away the damp strands of hair that had clung to her forehead, and her blue eyes shone with fierce determination.

The sailors had probably already guessed what her true hair color was, and I’d met her before she’d disguised herself—but even so, we all found ourselves struck speechless, captivated by her beauty.



“My name is Rosemary von Velfalt, and I’m the first princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. I’d now like you to honor your word and call for the doctor.”

Every person there was too overwhelmed to react to what Mary had said. It took almost an entire minute for the rest of us to snap out of our trance.

The man returned to his senses. “D-Do you have any way to prove that you’re a princess?!” he shouted, as though trying to disrupt the atmosphere that Mary had created.

However, Mary didn’t lose her composure. “I don’t,” she replied in a flat tone of voice.

“Th-Then!”

“But...” she began. She fixed him with a gaze from those clear blue eyes, and he gasped.

“If I am who I say I am, will you be able to bear the responsibility? Will you be able to atone for the grave crime of allowing the death of someone important to Rosemary von Velfalt?”

Speech deserted him when he heard that. Not a soul present could refuse her.

The Reincarnated Princess Has a Visitor

Thanks to my heavy-handed appeal—well, it was more of a threat—we were allowed the use of a spacious mansion near the harbor. We were also informed that the doctor lived on the outskirts of town. A little more than ten minutes later, the man that'd gone to summon the doctor returned, carrying another, older man on his back.

The old man appeared to be in his sixties; his clothes were a mess and his grizzled hair was untidy, so he must've been pulled out of bed. He let out a big yawn and poked his hand through a gap in his clothes to scratch his stomach, but after seeing Klaus's condition, his expression grew severe.

"This...doesn't look good," he said.

When I heard those words, a bead of cold sweat trickled down my spine.

The doctor removed the bandage and towel from Klaus's torso, and we saw that the area around the wound had turned a faint dark-brown color. "Poison," the doctor muttered with a tut. "The ones who got him were pirates based in the islands, right? It's a wonder that he's still alive after a hit of their poison. What medicine was he given?"

"A concoction that I mixed up," Wolf answered, raising his hand.

"Yourself?" The doctor's eyes grew round. "You're saying...the medicine wasn't something you bought for a high price from a merchant? You just happened to be carrying the ingredients on you and made it from scratch?"

Wolf paused for a moment. "I keep a large stock of medicine on hand for my line of work. I just used that to throw something together."

"You 'threw it together'? That's...really something. A godlike level of prowess," the doctor said, his tone a mixture of admiration and shock.

Wolf said nothing in reply. He simply forced his lips into a bitter smile.

"I never expected I'd meet one of you in a tiny country town like this," the

doctor continued. "Living a long life does have its benefits." He then lowered his voice and whispered, "One of the miraculous tribe..."

The doctor was by my side, opposite Wolf, and his voice was so quiet that only Wolf and I could hear it. Even so, I was sure that I'd heard him correctly.

"I'm honored," Wolf replied, "but we don't have time to chat right now."

"True... But, what to do?" the doctor mumbled while rubbing his stubbly chin. "I'd like to scrape off the necrotic flesh near the wound... However, he might not survive if he loses any more blood."

I followed the doctor's gaze and stared at Klaus. His face was pale, and he hadn't regained consciousness since the attack. When I'd held his hand, he'd given no response. But it was his breathing that scared me the most; his inhales and exhales were so shallow that it seemed as if they might stop for good at any moment.

"It would be a different matter if there were some way to cut out the affected area and immediately stop the bleeding," the doctor mused, "but I don't expect you to have any medicine magical enough to do that."

"No," Wolf said at once. "But we have no choice but to do it."

The doctor furrowed his brows and sighed. "Yep," he agreed bitterly. He then turned to the townsfolk who'd been watching from a distance. "You lot! Boil some water!"

"Mary, you should—" Wolf started, but I interrupted him.

"I'll help!" I said enthusiastically.

Wolf's eyes grew round.

He'd probably been about to tell me to wait in another room. Staring at me intently, he seemed to be gauging my determination. "We're gonna be cutting his flesh away. That means there's about to be a lot of blood, even more than there was earlier. Do you understand that?"

He was making sure that I was prepared for what was coming. Frankly, I wasn't great with blood. I didn't like seeing pain either, and it did scare me...but not as much as the thought of leaving Klaus's side while he was on the verge of

death.

I looked Wolf in the eyes and nodded firmly. "I do."

"What am I gonna do with you..." Wolf said with exasperation, slapping his forehead and tilting his face back. Then, he let out a sigh so big that I thought he must've completely emptied his lungs of air. When Wolf looked back toward me again, he lowered his eyes for a moment and waved his hands in front of himself. "Fine. Got it. You can start by cleaning yourself off."

"Okay." I turned around and ran, weaving through the throngs of townsfolk who'd begun to scramble here and there.

First, I was given some water and a hand towel, which I used to clean myself, and then I borrowed some clothes from an adjacent room and got changed. I hastily slid on a blue-gray dress and a white apron, then tied up my hair so that it wouldn't get in the way.

Someone stopped me in the corridor as I was returning to Klaus's room. I turned around and saw Jan, the sailor in charge of the kitchen. He informed me that I had a visitor. This spooked me since I didn't know anyone in Flanmer, and moreover, I hadn't been scheduled to dock in this town. The only people who knew of my presence here were the ones that had been aboard the ship.

Jan's expression grew tense when he noticed vigilance in my reaction.

"They didn't seem like a bad sort to me," he said, "but if you don't know who they could be, then I'll tell them they can't see you. Don't go off on your own, just in case—if they turn out to be dangerous, we wouldn't want anything to happen to you." He spoke to me like a responsible grown-up and patted my head. But the next second, he seemed to remember something and his expression stiffened. He took a step backward. "Whoops... I forgot I have to treat you differently now. I beg your pardon, Your Highness."

"Please, don't!" I hurriedly stopped Jan from kneeling on the floor.

He stood back up, but I could see the confusion on his face.

I hadn't expected him to treat me exactly the same as before, but this was a bit too much for me to bear. I knew that his behavior was the result of what I'd chosen to do, but that didn't make me feel any less sad.

After I fell silent with an awkward look on my face, Jan seemed unsure of how to react, so he went quiet as well. I couldn't stand the uncomfortable silence, so I told him through stutters that I was in a rush before making my exit.

The preparations for the operation were done by the time I returned to Klaus's room. He was lying facedown and his arms and legs had been restrained, probably to prevent him from thrashing around if he regained consciousness. He'd also been gagged. There was incense burning, which explained the thin strands of smoke and the strange smell in the air. I wondered if it had a relaxing or pain-killing effect.

In place of a mask, Wolf had wrapped a cloth around his head to cover his mouth. "You took your time," he commented without moving his eyes from what he was doing with his hands.

I apologized while wrapping a cloth around my own head, then took my place next to Wolf. The doctor was standing opposite us, with Klaus in the middle.

I saw the doctor holding something—a small knife, which glinted in his grasp. The sight overwhelmed me. My heart started pounding noisily, my mouth immediately dried out, and I began to sweat all over. I wasn't even the person who was going to be performing surgery, but I felt so nervous that I thought I might pass out.

"Let's begin," the doctor stated with a grave tone of voice. He pressed the knife against Klaus's body. There was a quiet squelch, and the blade sank into his skin. Blood began to well up along the incision in a bead.

The sight alone hurt me, but I kept watching. After all, I'd made up my own mind to be by Klaus's side. I clenched my fists. The pain of my nails digging into my palms kept my focus from drifting. Around us, the air was thick with tension, and the only noise was the sound of medical implements in use.

Suddenly, the quietness was shattered by a clamor approaching the room. The door let out a loud bang as it was thrown open with such force that it almost flew off of its hinges.

"Lady Mary!!!" A well-dressed boy hurtled into the room, almost tripping over himself. The hood of his cloak fell away, revealing platinum-blond hair tied at the nape of his neck. He'd clearly been in a rush to get here, as his bangs clung

to his forehead where it was drenched with sweat. His violet eyes darted back and forth beneath his long eyelashes, searching.

I could've recognized that handsome face anywhere. "George?!" I called his name and ran over to him.

Several people followed George into the room, looking to evict this unexpected visitor. However, after seeing my reaction, they left him alone.

George sighed with relief. "Thank goodness... You're all right."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"A bird delivered a letter to us. The message said that pirates had attacked the ship you were on, and instructed us to head to this port town at once."

"A bird?" I repeated.

He nodded and elaborated. "A black bird."

Obviously, I had no idea what bird that was. I wanted to ask who'd sent the letter, along with a million other questions, but none of that was important right now.

"Mary, save the touching reunion for later," Wolf reprimanded. "Kick that lady-killer out of here."

"Yes, sorry!" I replied in a hurry. "We'll talk later," I said to George. I moved over and tried to push him out of the room, but he seized my hands instead. He pulled my arms, and I was more surprised than angry. This ungentlemanly behavior was uncharacteristic.

"George?"

"Please don't start the operation yet." George was looking over my shoulders, his eyes fixed on Wolf behind me.

I swiveled my head around and saw the doctor furrowing his brows suspiciously.

Wolf wore no facial expression except for a shockingly chilly look in his eyes. His face, with no smile or frown, looked as pretty as a china doll's, and that made his ice-cold glare stand out all the more. "Someone's life depends on this

operation, and you want us to wait? Who do you think you are, a god? Can you change people's fates?"

Finding himself on the receiving end of that glare, George began to look nervous. However, he didn't turn his eyes away from Wolf. "I'm not a god. I don't even have any special skills. I'm just a child... But *he* might be able to change fate."

"He?" Wolf's question coincided with the noise of the door opening again.

Bianca entered the room, and a slender young man walked in behind her. He was gripping her, holding on so he could stand upright. The soft, thin strands of his hair looked as messy as a bird's nest from where they'd been mussed by his hooded cloak. Drops of sweat dotted his forehead, and he looked terribly pale, perhaps short of breath since his shoulders were heaving. He was unsteady on his feet and seemed liable to trip, but even so, the young man let go of Bianca and stood on his own. When she shot him a concerned look, he smiled awkwardly.

"I'll be all right on my own now," he said.

His sister spoke up in concern. "But...Michael..."

"I'm fine," he repeated. "Thank you, sister." The young man—Michael—discarded his cloak and handed it to Bianca. Then, he turned to face me.

Our eyes met, and I unwittingly tensed up. I couldn't help that. After the way that we'd parted, I didn't know what to say to him.

Michael peered at me awkwardly.



“Princess.” Michael leaned down and stared into my eyes, but then he must’ve noticed something because his gaze dropped down.

I followed his eyes to see what’d caught his attention and noticed that there was a small red stain on my apron. *When did that get there?* I thought. *It’s a borrowed garment, so I shouldn’t get it dirty...*

Michael took hold of my right hand and lifted it up respectfully. A trickle of blood flowed from three crescent-shaped cuts on my palm; I must’ve been clenching my fists too hard earlier. He tenderly cupped my hand in both of his.

“I’ve been keeping a secret from you,” Michael murmured.

“Huh?”

“I’m an earth-affinity sorcerer. You know that, don’t you?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Earth-affinity sorcerers can’t use offensive magic,” he continued, “so what kind of magic do you think we *are* capable of?”

His thin fingers passed over the palm of my hand in one slow, smooth stroke. He was barely brushing my skin, and the contact only lasted for a dozen or so seconds. However, there was an obvious change in my hand. I saw that the three crescent-shaped cuts along the head line of my palm had vanished without a trace.

I gawked at my right hand with wide-open eyes, then flung my head up to look at Michael. There was a faint smile on his face. Indeed, it *was* a smile, but his lips were quivering. He looked like a child on the verge of tears.

“I’ll save the life of your precious guard...” he said. “That’s why I’m here.”

My brain was out of order, but the conversation proceeded without me.

Neither Wolf nor the doctor seemed to believe in magic. Not that they could be blamed for that—they were foreigners, and not even all of Nevel’s citizens believed in the existence of magic. However, Michael blew their doubts away with a spectacular demonstration: he cut the palm of his own hand with a knife

and then healed the wound right before their eyes.

“My magic isn’t all-powerful,” he stated. Then, he began to elaborate. According to him, his healing abilities weren’t a cure for everything. Apparently, they only allowed him to excite an individual’s innate capacity for healing.

“I can’t cure illnesses that require medication or surgery,” he explained. “The same goes for injuries like this one which require special treatment to deal with the poison. The most I can do is close the wound.”

Until now, Wolf had been too shocked to say anything, but it didn’t take him long to return to his senses and accept Michael’s help. “If you can stop him from bleeding out, that’s more than enough.” From the look on Wolf’s face, it was clear that he was ready to use any and all means at his disposal to save Klaus.

“But that will come with its own problem,” Michael said. “I’ll be forcibly exciting his body’s healing processes, which will drain his stamina. And if I exhaust his stamina before the wound is fully closed...” Michael’s words trailed off.

I knew the end to that sentence—though I didn’t want to—and I looked down at Klaus. His face was already as pale as a sheet of paper. I wasn’t sure whether he had enough stamina left to heal such a huge wound.

My mind went blank. I tensed my leg muscles up. If I hadn’t, then I would’ve surely collapsed onto the floor.

“All the more reason not to waste time,” asserted Wolf.

“Yeah,” agreed the doctor. “Let’s get on with it.”

They’d made up their minds, and their voices were resolute. The two of them returned to Klaus’s bedside, and Michael followed them, rolling up his sleeves and readying himself.

I seemed to be the only one not coping.

“Mary,” Wolf called out.

“Y-Yes!” I answered, raising my head. I tensed up, anticipating another scolding.

However, Wolf defied my expectations and gazed down at me with a gentle look in his eyes. “Take it easy and have a seat.”

“N-No! I’ll stay here and—”

“I’m not telling you to go,” he interrupted. “Sit there and talk to Klaus.”

“Huh?!”

I’d expected him to tell me to leave because I was in the way, just as he had before. I hadn’t thought that I’d be allowed to remain unless I could prove useful.

Tears welled in my eyes and blurred my vision.

“No crying,” Wolf said with a wry smile. “If anyone’s voice can reach him, it’s yours. It’s your job to keep him down here with us.”

“I will.” I wiped away my tears and knelt by Klaus’s bedside.

I stared down at his face and brushed a lock of hair away from his cheek with my fingers. There was a crinkling noise as a dark-brown flake dropped from his hair. His body was so covered with blood that I couldn’t even tell whether it was his or someone else’s. Every drop of blood, every speck of mud, and every one of the countless cuts etched into his skin gave testament to how desperately he’d fought to protect me.

“Klaus.” I touched his cheek, and with my other palm, I covered his hand. Although “covered” wasn’t quite the right word—his hands were much bigger than mine, so it simply looked like I was clinging to him. “Please, Klaus. Fight.”

I repeated that last word over and over, so many times that I lost count.

Then, Klaus’s body jerked. His eyes were still shut, but he was scrunching his face up in an expression of anguish. He let out a muffled groan. Accompanying his pitiful moans was the gruesome sound of the blade slicing through flesh.

An incision without anesthetics... The pain must be unimaginable. It’s practically torture.

“Ugh!!!”

“Klaus!”

His nails dug into the bed beneath him, and I grasped his large hands tightly from above. I wasn't sure whether doing this would interrupt the procedure, but I couldn't bear to sit there and do nothing. I called his name again, and again, and again, like I'd lost my mind.

"Hold him down!" Wolf ordered.

"Got it!!!" Michael answered.

The two of them piled on top of Klaus and restrained him as his body thrashed around to escape the pain.

The cloth that had been gagging him came loose and fell from his mouth. "Aaaaargh!!!" Klaus's scream resounded throughout the room. It was a fierce sound, like a beast's howl.

If this carries on, he'll bite his own tongue, I thought. I hurriedly picked up the cloth and tried to gag him again, but I couldn't force it all the way inside his mouth because of how much he was thrashing around. Before I managed to do anything, Klaus's mouth slammed shut. A trickle of blood flowed through his gritted teeth and oozed out of the corner of his lips.

Did he bite his tongue? I thought, growing pale. "Klaus! Klaus!!!" I clutched his cheeks with both hands and shouted his name.

But then, I heard the metallic *ping* of the scalpel landing on the floor.

The doctor exhaled deeply, letting out the breath that he'd been holding, and then he said to Michael, "Done! I can hand the rest over to you now, right, boy?!"

"Yes!" Michael replied, and immediately, he held his palms above Klaus's wound. He stared at his hands, a fierce determination shining in his eyes. A bead of sweat appeared on his forehead. This act must've required a considerable amount of concentration.

As I stood witness, Michael's eyes changed color from black to turquoise. This shift wasn't as dramatic as Lutz's or Teo's, but his irises now looked as beautiful and intricate as the surface of a deep lake.

Finally, Michael's hands began to radiate a faint glow. The gentle light dimly

illuminated his surroundings, casting shadows across his handsome face.

The first change to Klaus's condition came a short time after that—his tensed muscles slowly began to relax. His fingers, which had been clawing at the bedsheets, grew lax, and the blood vessels that had been throbbing on the back of his hand grew less prominent.

This is all okay...as long as it's just his body's relief at being freed from pain. But his complexion looks too pale for me to jump to that conclusion just yet.

Klaus's brows unfurrowed, and his face looked so peaceful... Too peaceful. Anxiety welled up inside me. He looked like a waxen model, completely devoid of vigor, and I couldn't control my sense of dread. My stomach was churning.

Through my hands, on top of his, I felt the coldness of his skin. It filled me with so much terror that I wanted to scream.

I thought that I could hear the footsteps of Death coming to claim him.

"Klaus!!!" I yelled as if to shake off my fears. "I won't allow it! You don't have the right! I forbid you to die!!!" My entire body was quivering, and my voice was just as shaken and uncontrolled. But I didn't let that stop me. I continued to shout. "Aren't you supposed to be my guard?! Are you going to leave me on my own all the way out here?! Don't you know how irresponsible that is?!?!"

I wanted to say, "What are you talking about?" and give myself a punch. He's protected me more than enough. And he's accomplished above and beyond what he needed to. If anyone's irresponsible, it's me—I've flung myself into a world of danger despite having no means to protect myself, and now I'm dragging everyone around me into it.

Klaus, was I wrong to ask you to accompany me? Or maybe I was wrong to set out on this journey in the first place. I'm a little girl with no power of my own...and I somehow latched onto the idea that I could actually change the future of this world. This very second, my ignorance and arrogance are killing you.

A large teardrop fell onto the back of Klaus's hand, which I was gripping in my own. The drop splashed on his skin, merged with some half-dried blood, and left a faint red trail as it trickled down his hand.

“Klaus... Hey, Klaus...!”

If you leave me now, how am I ever going to make it up to you?

Every single time you tried to grow closer to me, I pushed you away. I stubbornly refused to acknowledge the respect and loyalty that you showed me. This entire time, to me, you were just the guard who got on my nerves with his meddling. Nothing’s changed since the time we first met.

Wait, no. I’ve just convinced myself that nothing has. But in truth, I relied on you so much. I did think that you were annoying and hard to be around, but I still knew that you were there for me.

And...I was only just beginning to think of you as my second older brother...

“I-If you die, I’ll carry on with my journey on my own! I’ll... I’ll leave you behind!!!”

I knew how ridiculous I must’ve sounded. I was acting more spoiled than a child throwing a tantrum, and even a five-year-old’s vocabulary would’ve sounded more impressive than mine right now.

In my mind, I was aware that I was acting pathetic, but I just couldn’t stop babbling. More than anything, the silence scared me. “I can’t exactly take you back to Nevel... Nobody here knows you, so your grave will end up covered in weeds! And someone else will become my guard...!!! Are you okay with that?!”

I was ripping out my voice from deep inside my body, and it came out hoarse. Plus, the intermittent sounds of my sobs probably made it difficult to understand my words. Not that there was much to understand, as it was incoherent yammering anyway. It sounded like nothing more than hysteria.

But even so...

It reached him.

It reached the one person that I’d been calling out for.

“I’ll...have something to...say about that.”

For a moment, I failed to understand what had happened. At first, I thought my ears were playing tricks on me, and then I doubted my eyes. I felt Klaus’s hand stir slightly within my firm grip. Although they’d been cold and limp, his

fingers squeezed mine back. It would be difficult to express in words just how much that action shocked me.

I sat, frozen, and watched. Klaus's eyelids, which had been held firmly shut, trembled and slowly began to open. His green eyes, now visible, lacked focus at first—but after a while, they began to move with purpose. They drifted left, then right, and finally, they found me. He looked at me with a gentle narrowing of his eyes, and I grew flustered.

“Lady...Rosemary.”

I took a sharp breath. I wanted to say something to him, to make sure that I wasn't dreaming, but my voice stuck in my throat and I didn't manage to form any words. When my voice failed, I tried to use my eyes to get visual confirmation that this was real. But I could hardly see anything.

My vision's all blurry and blotched. My eyes aren't doing their job at all, the useless things...

A teardrop streaked down my face. My cheeks stung. My throat hurt as well, and there was a ringing in my ears.

“Don't cry...” Klaus said with a troubled smile. “I can't move my body, so I can't wipe away your tears.”

What are you going on about? You've never been one to do something that pretentious anyway, and I've never been one to allow you to.

I bluntly shot him down. “I'd never let you.”

“Ouch,” Klaus muttered, casting his eyes down and smiling.



The Reincarnated Princess Is Astonished

Consciousness slowly returned to me.

The first thing I saw in my blurred vision was an unfamiliar ceiling. There were none of the engravings of ivy or frescoes or magnificent stuccos that I was used to seeing in the palace. Instead, it was a flat ceiling, its color faded. The design was simple, with evenly spaced black beams.

Where am I? I tried to think, but my head wasn't working right. My eyes wandered around the room aimlessly until my jumbled thoughts began to become coherent. Then, I remembered the pale face of my personal guard.

"Klaus...! Ouch?!" I shot upright but immediately felt a throbbing pain. I let out a groan while cradling my head. *I know what this is... Rose, it's the migraine you experience when you've slept for too long, or when you've fallen asleep at the wrong time.* I pressed my fingertips against my temple and waited for the pain to pass, holding my breath. Once the throbbing had subsided, I let my breath out.

A voice called out to me. "Don't worry. Klaus is doing fine." It sounded like the owner of the voice had waited for me to calm down before speaking.

I swiveled my head around and examined the room, but I was alone.

"Over here," the voice said, guiding my eyes beyond an opened window, where I saw a hand waving at me.

I pushed myself off of the sofa I'd been resting on and walked over to the window. When I peered outside, I found a pair of honey-colored eyes looking back at me. A young man was sitting on the ground with his back against the wall, watching the sea.

"Wolf," I said.

"Morning. Looks like you didn't sleep well." Wolf laughed. Signs of fatigue were evident on his face as well.

“Did I pass out?” I asked.

“You don’t remember?”

“Um... A little? I think.” My response came out rather jumbled because I’d been organizing my memories while speaking.

After Klaus had regained consciousness, my knees had buckled. With the immediate emergency out of the way, the tension had drained from my body and I’d lost the ability to keep myself upright.

Wolf explained that he’d picked me up and carried me to another room. “You fell asleep on the sofa while I was out fetching you something to drink,” he said. Hearing that made my head ache even more. “We were all worried about you... You were sleeping so deeply that we thought you might’ve died.”

“I’m terribly sorry...” My head sank. *Klaus had the most acute injury, so we focused on him, but there were plenty of other wounded people. I can’t believe that I was over here snoozing on my own while everyone else was concentrating on tending to the injured.*

If there’s an empty grave nearby, I think I’ll jump in. Scratch that, I’ll even dig one myself. I just need to find someone to bury me...

“Why do you look so down?” Wolf asked.

“How else should I look? I wasn’t around to tend to anyone’s injuries, and I still haven’t thanked anyone for all the help I’ve received.”

The old doctor and Michael saved Klaus; George brought Michael here; Big Sis Bianca, Flora, Mia, the sailors... I’ve gotten help from just about everyone.

“You did remember to thank the sorcerer.”

“Huh?”

“When he ran over to help you up, you held his hand and kept repeating ‘thank you.’ You both started bawling. To be honest, I was at a loss for what to do...”

Wolf’s words prompted a vague resurgence of memory. After my legs had given out, Michael had tried to help me back to my feet in true gentlemanly fashion—but instead of letting him, I’d snatched his hand and repeated my

thanks like a broken record. I could remember the sight of his wide-open black eyes glistening and filled with tears.

Yep, that's right! Go ahead and make the guy who saved our asses cry. Brilliant play by me.

"You kept on thanking a bunch of people even after I picked you up. Every time we passed another person, you cried and said, 'Thank you, thank you.'"

Back up a second! When did I become the village drunk?! This is too much for me to take in! If it's all true, then that would mean I really have embarrassed myself...in front of everyone?!

"It gave me a good laugh," Wolf said. "All these grown men were tripping over themselves, clueless about what to do. If I'd been one of those men, I wouldn't have wanted anyone to see me acting that pathetically. Even that lady-killer friend of yours was blushing from ear to ear, I swear."

"Please stop... You're actually killing me." I hid my bright-red cheeks behind my hands, then crouched down and tucked my head beneath my knees. I heard an amused chuckle coming from above my head.

"You aren't very princessy after all, are you?" Wolf said tenderly. His tone wasn't at all mocking.

I lifted my head and peered up through my fingers. Wolf was leaning in through the window with one arm on the windowsill, cradling his chin. The look in his eyes was as soft and kind as his voice.

His caring gaze caused my stiff body to relax. My face slowly emerged from beneath my hands and I looked up at him. "Wolf."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you...very much."

I knelt, sitting on my heels, and sat up straight. Then, I positioned my hands on the floor in front of me, so that my fingers formed the edges of a triangle with my knees as the base. I lowered my head so that it nearly touched the ground, and that was when Wolf grew startled and called out to me.

"Wait, Mary! What are you doing?!"

“Thanking you.”

“Yeah, I’m not blind! What I mean is... You’re a princess! You shouldn’t be bowing your head to some nobody doctor!”

“Being a doctor or a princess doesn’t matter when it comes to expressing gratitude,” I stated. “Besides, we’re not at court. You and I are the only ones here.”

“But still!”

“Khuer, the miraculous tribe.”

Wolf’s eyes shot wide open when I spoke those words.

“I’ve heard that your tribe is one that’s shrouded in mystery. That your people disdain almost all contact with the outside world. Isn’t revealing your identity supposed to be your greatest taboo?”

Despite possessing an inordinate wealth of knowledge and expertise, this tribe recognized no individual as their employer. That was probably far tougher than I could imagine. Preserving the preexisting knowledge of previous generations would take no more than a few people with the right amount of zeal. But, researching and perfecting new techniques and medicines in the hopes of novel discoveries would inevitably need funding. Even so, they’d pledged themselves to neither a specific employer nor a sponsor, and they did not inflate the price of their medicines. I had to take my hat off to their way of living. To the core, they were a stoic people.

Moreover, even if the Khuer tribe shunned employment from outside benefactors, those with influence would probably keep hounding them. Very occasionally, people with authority from noble families would exhibit a strong desire to preserve their own lives; perhaps some of them would want to hoard the Khuer’s knowledge and expertise for themselves. In other words, the preservation of their traditions wasn’t the only reason why the Khuer tribe hid from the public eye and kept even the location of their village a secret.

“You could have feigned ignorance and kept up your act,” I said. “But instead, you worked tirelessly to save Klaus, even knowing that you risked revealing your true identity. I must express my deepest respect and gratitude for your

compassion and sincerity. Thank you for saving my dear friend.” I bowed my head low once more.

Neither of us said a word. There was quiet, and the only noise was the distant bustle of people and the faraway roaring of the waves. The tranquil silence was broken by a very long sigh.

Is he fed up with me? I wondered. I raised my head to check and saw Wolf leaning heavily on the windowsill, burying his head between his crossed arms.

“Wolf?”

“Stop,” Wolf groaned, his voice agonized. He raised his head slightly from his arms. “I don’t deserve your thanks. I’m not the great person that you’re making me out to be.”

I thought that I could see a hint of self-derision in his smile.

“You remember how I foisted all the work onto you?” he asked. “When the maid fainted... When the sailor broke his arm.”

“But you needed to do that to hide your identity. Besides, if I’d said that I couldn’t do it, then you were planning to treat them yourself, weren’t you?”

Wolf did entrust Mia and Kurt’s treatments to me. But if I’d said that I couldn’t handle them, then I’m sure he would’ve taken over. That wasn’t just my guess; it was closer to conviction.

“I was testing you!” he exclaimed. “Do you get it?!”

My jaw dropped. “Testing me?”

A simple question arose in my mind. *Why? What could he possibly gain from testing me?*

As though he’d plucked that question out of my head, Wolf responded, “I stopped by Nevel so that I could meet the goddess from that rumor.”

Wolf told me that he’d spent some time gathering information in a port. He’d learned that a ship belonging to Julius zu Eigel, the second son of the Eigel family and an acquaintance of the goddess, would be setting sail.

“I needed to return home for a while anyway, so I boarded your ship. Lo and

behold, the word on deck was that one of the passengers was the goddess. I couldn't believe my luck. Although I did rule *her* out almost immediately."

Once he'd discounted Flora, Wolf had told himself that he'd have another opportunity to resume his search for the goddess when he next returned to Nevel. However, after running into me in the kitchen, he'd apparently suspected that I might be the real goddess.

"But I didn't have the right hair color," I pointed out.

"No. But you caught my eye. Anyway, it didn't matter whether you were actually the goddess—she wasn't all that I was searching for."

He was searching for something else? I shot him a questioning look, but for some reason, he scrunched his face up. He looked as worried as a child about to be told off, which was a big departure from the self-assured expression that he usually sported. As a result, I couldn't bring myself to press the matter further. Instead, I opted to say something else. "Did I manage to live up to your expectations?" I asked, chuckling and hoping that Wolf would reply with a casual "*yeah, as if.*"

However, I'd misjudged his reaction—his expression seemed anguished and weak. He pulled on his hair.

"You blew my expectations out of the water. I mean, really, what's with you? Why did you have to be a princess? It's great that you have some authority, but couldn't you have been born into a slightly lower class?"

That statement reminded me of a quote from Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the tone of his voice wasn't nearly sweet enough to be a profession of love. I felt like he was criticizing me.

"If you *had* to be a princess, then you should've at least acted like a princess should... Much more arrogant. If you'd just been ignorant and petty like a spoiled noble girl... I could've looked for someone else. I could've convinced myself to look elsewhere, knowing that there are more than enough well-intentioned wealthy people out there for me to find."

"Wolf...?"

I have no idea what he's getting at, I thought, confused.

Wolf continued to stare at me. “Tell me something, Mary.” He reached out and grabbed my wrists with his large hands.

I grew ever more confused about what he was trying to do.

“What do you think will happen to you now?” he asked.

“Well...now that I’ve revealed myself to be a princess, I imagine that they’ll cart me off to Flanmer’s royal palace before deporting me back to Nevel.”

“They’ll invite me to a royal reception before escorting me home” would’ve been a more delicate way to put it, but the essentials were the same. *And I haven’t even achieved anything yet...*

I’d managed to accomplish my primary objective—make contact with one of the Khuer tribe—but I had too little time to negotiate. Taking into account the fact that Wolf’s identity had been exposed, I doubted that there was any way to keep him around for much longer. And so, I would return to Nevel empty-handed.

“Will you ever come back?” he asked.

“Not possible... In fact, I’ll be lucky if I’m ever allowed outside the palace again,” I said with a wry smile.

I couldn’t imagine my father being the sort of person to give his daughter a second chance after she’d already failed once.

Wolf heaved a long sigh and slowly blinked his eyes. When he reopened them, he fixed me with his gaze. The serious look on his face was enough to shock me. “Right... That leaves me no choice then.”

“Huh? What are... Hey?!” My world turned upside down. I’d been looking up at the sky through the window, but now the ground filled my vision.

Wolf had picked me up and flung me over his shoulders. He grabbed some of his things that he’d placed nearby and then forced a hood over my head. Wolf slipped out through a rear entrance and descended a flight of stairs, encountering nobody else along the way. He was sure on his feet.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “What are you doing?!”

Why’s he carrying me? And where the hell is he taking me?!

(Continued in the next volume)





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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:
Volume 3

by Bisu

Translated by Tom Harris Edited by C.D. Leeson

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